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Fantasy and Science Fiction

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science fiction novelet

BY ALFRED BESTER

KARBERGER

RAY BRADBURY

SHIRLEY JACKSON

ANTHONY BOUCHER

MANLY WADE WELLMAN

A selection of the best stories of fantasy and science fiction new and old

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THE MAGAZINE OF

Fantasy and Science Fiction

VOLUME 6, No. 3 MARCH

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(illustrating 5,271,009, *by Alfred Bester)*

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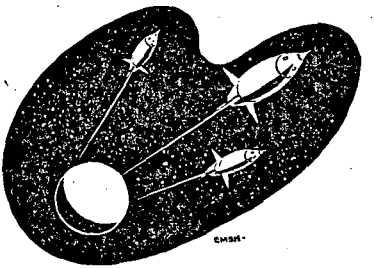

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Of all the many generalized charges hurled at science fiction, the one with the largest percentage of truth is that this new literature is pap for paranoids, a series of reassuring fictions which free the individual from responsibility for his acts and decisions. Everything is caused by Them (alien invaders, time travelers, mad scientists . . .) and everything will be set right by Him (the superman, the all-powerful mutant, the unmad scientist . . .). Alfred Bester has consistently rejected this pattern, both in his fiction and in his criticism; but we think he has never stated his opposition so brilliantly and cogently as in this startling story. And readers of earlier Bester stories in F&SF or of THE DEMOLISHED MAN *do not need to be told that he states his thesis in terms of a sweeping, exciting novelet of action, with a stimulatingly individual prose style.*

5,271,009

by ALFRED BESTER

TAKE TWO PARTS of Beelzebub, two of Israfel, one of Monte Cristo, one of Cyrano, mix violently, season with mystery and you have Mr. Solon Aquila. He is tall, gaunt, sprightly in manner, bitter in expression, and when he laughs his dark eyes turn into wounds. His occupation is unknown. He is wealthy without visible means of support. He is seen everywhere and understood nowhere. There is something odd about his life.

This is what's odd about Mr. Aquila, and you can make what you will of it. When he walks he is never forced to wait on a traffic signal. When he desires to ride there is always a vacant taxi on hand. When he bustles into his hotel an elevator always happens to be waiting. When he enters a store, a salesclerk is always free to serve him. There always happens to be a table available for Mr. Aquila in restaurants. There are always last-minute ticket returns when he craves entertainment at sold-out shows.

You can question waiters, hack drivers, elevator girls, salesmen, box-office men. There is no conspiracy. Mr. Aquila does not bribe or blackmail for these petty conveniences. In any case, it would not be possible for him to bribe or blackmail the automatic clock that governs the city traffic signal system. These things, which make life so convenient for him, simply

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happen. Mr. Solon Aquila is never disappointed. Presently we shall hear about his first disappointment and see what it led to.

Mr. Aquila has been seen fraternizing in low saloons, in middle saloons, in high saloons. He has been met in bagnios, at coronations, executions, circuses, magistrate's courts and handbook offices. He has been known to buy antique cars, historic jewels, incunabula, pornography, chemicals, porro prisms, polo ponies and full-choke shotguns.

"HimmelHerGottSeiDank! I'm crazy, man, crazy. Eclectic, by God," he told a flabbergasted department store president. "The Weltmann type, nicht wahr? My ideal: Goethe. Tout le monde. God damn."

He spoke a spectacular tongue of mixed metaphors and meanings. Dozens of languages and dialects came out in machine-gun bursts. Apparently he also lied *ad libitum*.

"Sacré bleu. Jeez!" he was heard to say once. "Aquila from the Latin. Means aquiline. O tempora O mores. Speech by Cicero. My ancestor."

And another time: "My idol: Kipling. Took my name from him. Aquila, one of his heroes. God damn. Greatest Negro writer since *Uncle Tom's Cabin*."

On the morning that Mr. Solon Aquila was stunned by his first disappointment, he bustled into the atelier of Lagan & Derelict, dealers in paintings, sculpture and rare objects of art. It was his intention to buy a painting. Mr. James Derelict knew Aquila as a client. He had already purchased a Frederick Remington and a Winslow Homer some time ago when, by another odd coincidence, he had bounced into the Madison Avenue shop one minute after the coveted paintings went up for sale. Mr. Derelict had also seen Mr. Aquila boat a prize striper at Montauk.

"Bon soir, bel esprit, God damn, Jimmy," Mr. Aquila said. He was on first name terms with everyone. "Here's a cool day for color, oui! Cool. Slang. I have in me to buy a picture."

"Good morning, Mr. Aquila," Derelict answered. He had the seamed face of a cardsharp, but his blue eyes were honest and his smile was disarming. However at this moment his smile seemed strained, as though the volatile appearance of Aquila had unnerved him.

"I'm in the mood for your man, by Jeez," Aquila said, rapidly opening cases, fingering ivories and tasting the porcelains. "What's his name, my old? Artist like Bosch. Like Heinrich Kley. You handle him, parbleu, exclusive. O si sic omnia, by Zeus!"

"Jeffrey Halsyon?" Derelict asked timidly.

"Oeil de boeuf!" Aquila cried. "What a memory. Chryselephantine. Exactly the artist I want. He is my favorite. A monochrome, preferably. A small Jeffrey Halsyon for Aquila, bitte. Wrap her up."

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"I wouldn't have believed it," Derelict muttered.

"Ah! Ah-ha? This is not 100 proof guaranteed Ming," Mr. Aquila exclaimed, brandishing an exquisite vase. "Caveat emptor, by damn. Well, Jimmy? I snap my fingers. No Halsyons in stock, old faithful?"

"It's extremely odd, Mr. Aquila." Derelict seemed to struggle with himself. "Your coming in like this. A Halsyon monochrome arrived not five minutes ago."

"You see? Tempo ist Richtung. Well?"

"I'd rather not show it to you. For personal reasons, Mr. Aquila."

"HimmelHerrGott! Pourquoi? She's bespoke?"

"N-no, sir. Not for my personal reasons. For your personal reasons."

"Oh? God damn. Explain myself to me."

"Anyway it isn't for sale, Mr. Aquila. It can't be sold."

"For why not? Speak, old fish & chips."

"I can't say, Mr. Aquila."

"Zut alors! Must I judo your arm, Jimmy? You can't show. You can't sell. Me, internally, I have pressurized myself for a Jeffrey Halsyon. My favorite. God damn. Show me the Halsyon or sic transit gloria mundi. You hear me, Jimmy?"

Derelict hesitated, then shrugged. "Very well, Mr. Aquila. I'll show you."

Derelict led Aquila past cases of china and silver, past lacquer and bronzes and suits of shimmering armor to the gallery in the rear of the shop where dozens of paintings hung on the gray velour walls, glowing under warm spotlights. He opened a drawer in a Goddard breakfront and took out a Manila envelope. On the envelope was printed BABYLON INSTITUTE. From the envelope Derelict withdrew a dollar bill and handed it to Mr. Aquila.

"Jeffrey Halsyon's latest," he said.

With a fine pen and carbon ink, a cunning hand had drawn another portrait over the face of George Washington on the dollar bill. It was a hateful, diabolic face set in a hellish background. It was a face to strike terror, in a scene to inspire loathing. The face was a portrait of Mr. Aquila.

"God damn," Mr. Aquila said.

"You see, sir? I didn't want to hurt your feelings."

"Now I must own him, big boy." Mr. Aquila appeared to be fascinated by the portrait. "Is she accident or for purpose? Does Halsyon know myself? Ergo sum."

"Not to my knowledge, Mr. Aquila. But in any event I can't sell the drawing. It's evidence of a felony . . . mutilating United States currency. It must be destroyed."

"Never!" Mr. Aquila returned the drawing as though he feared the

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dealer would instantly set fire to it. "Never, Jimmy. Nevermore quoth the raven. God damn. Why does he draw on money, Halsyon? My picture, pfui. Criminal libels but n'importe. But pictures on money? Wasteful. Joci causa."

"He's insane, Mr. Aquila."

"No! Yes? Insane?" Aquila was shocked.

"Quite insane, sir. It's very sad. They've had to put him away. He spends his time drawing these pictures on money."

"God damn, mon ami. Who gives him money?"

"I do, Mr. Aquila; and his friends. Whenever we visit him he begs for money for his drawings."

"Le jour viendra, by Jeez! Why you don't give him paper for drawings, eh, my ancient of days?"

Derelict smiled sadly. "We tried that, sir. When we gave Jeff paper, he drew pictures of money."

"HimmelHerrGott! My favorite artist. In the looney bin. Eh bien. How in the holy hell am I to buy paintings from same if such be the case?"

"You won't, Mr. Aquila. I'm afraid no one will ever buy a Halsyon again. He's quite hopeless."

"Why does he jump his tracks, Jimmy?"

"They say its a withdrawal, Mr. Aquila. His success did it to him."

"Ah? Q.E.D. me, big boy. Translate."

"Well, sir, he's still a young man; in his thirties and very immature. When he became so very successful, he wasn't ready for it. He wasn't prepared for the responsibilities of his life and his career. That's what the doctors told me. So he turned his back on everything and withdrew into childhood."

"Ah? And the drawing on money?"

"They say that's his symbol of his return to childhood, Mr. Aquila. It proves he's too young to know what money is for."

"Ah? Oui. Ja. Astute, by crackey. And my portrait?"

"I can't explain that, Mr. Aquila, unless you have met him in the past and he remembers you somehow."

"Hmmm. Perhaps. So. You know something, my attic of Greece? I am disappointed. Je n'oublierai jamais. I am most severely disappointed. God damn. No more Halsyons ever? Merde. My slogan. We must do something about Jeffrey Halsyon. I will not be disappointed. We must do something."

Mr. Solon Aquila nodded his head emphatically, took out a cigarette, took out a lighter, then paused, deep in thought. After a long moment, he nodded again, this time with decision, and did an astonishing thing. He returned the lighter to his pocket, took out another, glanced around quickly and lit it under Mr. Derelict's nose.

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Mr. Derelict appeared not to notice. Mr. Derelict appeared, in one instant, without transition, to be stuffed. Allowing the lighter to burn, Mr. Aquila placed it carefully on a ledge in front of the art dealer who stood before it without moving. The orange flame gleamed on his glassy eyeballs.

Aquila darted out into the shop, searched and found a rare Chinese crystal globe. He took it from its case, warmed it against his heart and peered into it. He mumbled. He nodded. He returned the globe to the case, went to the cashier's desk, took a pad and pencil and began ciphering in symbols that bore no relationship to any language or any graphology. He nodded again, tore up the sheet of paper and took out his wallet.

From the wallet he removed a dollar bill. He placed the bill on the glass counter, took an assortment of fountain pens from his vest pocket, selected one and unscrewed it. Carefully shielding his eyes, he allowed one drop to fall from the penpoint onto the bill. There was a blinding flash of light. There was a humming vibration that slowly died.

Mr. Aquila returned the pens to his pocket, carefully picked up the bill by a corner and ran back into the picture gallery where the art dealer still stood staring glassily at the orange flame. Aquila fluttered the bill before the sightless eyes.

"Listen, my ancient," Aquila whispered. "You will visit Jeffrey Halsyon this afternoon. N'est-ce-pas? You will give him this very own coin of the realm when he asks for drawing materials. Eh? God damn." He removed Mr. Derelict's wallet from his pocket, placed the bill inside and returned the wallet.

"And this is why you make the visit," Aquila continued. "It is because you have had an inspiration from le Diable Boiteux. Nolens volens, the lame devil has inspired you with a plan for healing Jeffrey Halsyon. God damn. You will show him samples of his great art of the past to bring him to his senses. Memory is the all-mother. HimmelHerrGott! You hear me, big boy? You do what I say. Go today and devil take the hindmost."

Mr. Aquila picked up the burning lighter, lit his cigarette and permitted the flame to go out. As he did so, he said: "No, my holy of holies! Jeffrey Halsyon is too great an artist to languish in durance vile. He must be returned to this world. He must be returned to me. È sempre l'ora. I will not be disappointed. You hear me, Jimmy? I will not!"

"Perhaps there's hope, Mr. Aquila," James Derelict said. "Something's just occurred to me while you were talking . . . a way to bring Jeff back to sanity. I'm going to try it this afternoon."

As he drew the face of the Faraway Fiend over George Washington's portrait on a bill, Jeffrey Halsyon dictated his autobiography to nobody.

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"Like Cellini," he recited. "Line and literature simultaneously. Hand in hand, although all art is one art, holy brothers in barbiturate, near ones and dear ones in nembutal. Very well. I commence: I was born. I am dead. Baby wants a dollar. No —"

He arose from the padded floor and raged from padded wall to padded wall, envisioning anger as a deep purple fury running into the pale lavenders of recrimination by the magic of his brushwork, his chiaroscuro, by the clever blending of oil, pigment, light and the stolen genius of Jeffrey Halsyon torn from him by the Faraway Fiend whose hideous face —

"Begin anew," he muttered. "We darken the highlights. Start with the underpainting. . . ." He squatted on the floor again, picked up the quill drawing pen whose point was warranted harmless, dipped it into carbon ink whose contents were warranted poisonless, and applied himself to the monstrous face of the Faraway Fiend which was replacing the first president on the dollar.

"I was born," he dictated to space while his cunning hand wrought beauty and horror on the banknote paper. "I had peace. I had hope. I had art. I had peace. Mama. Papa. Kin I have a glass a water? Oooo! There was a big bad bogey man who gave me a look; a big bad look and he fighta baby. Baby's afraid. Mama! Baby wantsa make pretty pictures onna pretty paper for Mama and Papa. Look, Mama. Baby makin' a picture of the bad bogey man who fighta baby with a mean look, a black look with his black eyes like pools of hell, like cold fires of terror, like faraway fiends from faraway fears — Who's that!"

The cell door unbolted. Halsyon leaped into a corner and cowered, naked and squalling, as the door was opened for the Faraway Fiend to enter. But it was only the medicine man in his white jacket and a stranger man in black suit, black homburg, carrying a black portfolio with the initials J. D. lettered on it in a bastard gold Gothic with ludicrous overtones of Goudy and Baskerville.

"Well, Jeffrey?" the medicine man inquired heartily.

"Dollar?" Halsyon whined. "Kin baby have a dollar?"

"I've brought an old friend, Jeffrey. You remember Mr. Derelict?"

"Dollar," Halsyon whined. "Baby wants a dollar."

"What happened to the last one, Jeffrey? You haven't finished it yet, have you?"

Halsyon sat on the bill to conceal it, but the medicine man was too quick for him. He snatched it up and he and the stranger man examined it.

"As great as all the rest," Derelict sighed. "Greater. What a magnificent talent wasting away. . . ."

Halsyon began to weep. "Baby wants a dollar!" he cried.

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The stranger man took out his wallet, selected a dollar bill and handed it to Halsyon. As soon as he touched it, he heard it sing and he tried to sing with it, but it was singing him a private song so he had to listen.

It was a lovely dollar; smooth but not too new, with a faintly matte surface that would take ink like kisses. George Washington looked reproachful but resigned, as though he were used to the treatment in store for him. And indeed he might well be, for he was much older on this dollar. Much older than on any other for his serial number was 5,271,009 which made him 5,000,000 years old and more, and the oldest he had ever been before was 2,000,000.

As Halsyon squatted contentedly on the floor and dipped his pen in the ink as the dollar told him to, he heard the medicine man say, "I don't think I should leave you alone, Mr. Derelict."

"No, we must be, doctor. Jeff always was shy about his work. He could only discuss it with me when we were alone."

"How much time would you need?"

"Give me an hour."

"I doubt very much whether it'll do any good."

"But there's no harm trying?"

"I suppose not. All right, Mr. Derelict. Call the nurse when you're through."

The door opened; the door closed. The stranger man named Derelict put his hand on Halsyon's shoulder in a friendly, intimate way. Halsyon looked up at him and grinned cleverly, meanwhile waiting for the sound of the bolt in the door. It came; like a shot, like a final nail in a coffin.

"Jeff, I've brought some of your old work with me," Derelict said in a voice that was only approximately casual. "I thought you might like to look it over with me."

"Have you got a watch on you?" Halsyon asked.

Restraining his start of surprise at Halsyon's normal tone, the art dealer took out his pocket watch and displayed it.

"Lend it to me for a minute."

Derelict unchained the watch and handed it over. Halsyon took it carefully and said, "All right. Go ahead with the pictures."

"Jeff!" Derelict exclaimed. "This is you again, isn't it? This is the way you always —"

"Thirty," Halsyon interrupted. "Thirty-five, forty, forty-five, fifty, fifty-five, ONE." He concentrated on the flicking second hand with rapt expectation.

"No, I guess it isn't," the dealer muttered. "I only imagined you sounded — Oh well." He opened the portfolio and began sorting mounted drawings.

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"Forty, forty-five, fifty, fifty-five, TWO."

"Here's one of your earliest, Jeff. Remember when you came into the gallery with the roughs and we thought you were the new polisher from the agency? Took you months to forgive us. You always claimed we bought your first picture just to apologize. Do you still think so?"

"Forty, forty-five, fifty, fifty-five, THREE."

"Here's that tempera that gave you so many heartaches. I was wondering if you'd care to try another? I really don't think tempera is as inflexible as you claim and I'd be interested to have you try again now that your technique's so much more matured. What do you say?"

"Forty, forty-five, fifty, fifty-five, FOUR."

"Jeff, put down that watch."

"Ten, fifteen, twenty, twenty-five . . ."

"What the devil's the point of counting minutes?"

"Well," Halsyon said reasonably, "sometimes they lock the door and go away. Other times they lock up and stay and spy on you. But they never spy longer than three minutes so I'm giving them five just to make sure. FIVE."

Halsyon gripped the small pocket watch in his big fist and drove the fist cleanly into Derelict's jaw. The dealer dropped without a sound. Halsyon dragged him to the wall, stripped him naked, dressed himself in his clothes, repacked the portfolio and closed it. He picked up the dollar bill and pocketed it. He picked up the bottle of carbon ink warranted nonpoisonous and dashed the contents into his face.

Choking and shouting, he brought the nurse to the door.

"Let me out of here," Halsyon cried in a muffled voice. "That maniac tried to drown me. Threw ink in my face. I want out!"

The door was unbolted and opened. Halsyon shoved past the nurse man, cunningly mopping his blackened face with a hand that only smeared it more. As the nurse man started to enter the cell, Halsyon said, "Never mind Halsyon. He's all right. Get me a towel or something. Hurry!"

The nurse man locked the door again, turned and ran down the corridor. Halsyon waited until he disappeared into a supply room, then turned and ran in the opposite direction. He went through the heavy doors to the main wing corridor, still cleverly mopping, still sputtering with cunning indignation. He reached the main building. He was halfway out and still no alarm. He knew those brazen bells. They tested them every Wednesday noon.

It's like a Ringaleevio game, he told himself. It's fun. It's games. It's nothing to be scared of. It's being safely, sanely, joyously a kid again and when we quit playing I'm going home to mama and dinner and papa reading me the funnies and I'm a kid again, really a kid again, forever.

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There still was no hue and cry when he reached the main floor. He complained about his indignity to the receptionist. He complained to the protection guards as he forged James Derelict's name in the visitors' book, and his inky hand smeared such a mess on the page that the forgery went undetected. The guard buzzed the final gate open. Halsyon passed through into the street, and as he started away he heard the brass throats of the bells begin a clattering that terrified him.

He ran. He stopped. He tried to stroll. He could not. He lurched down the street until he heard the guards shouting. He darted around a corner, and another, tore up endless streets, heard cars behind him, sirens, bells, shouts, commands. It was a ghastly Catherine Wheel of flight. Searching desperately for a hiding place, Halsyon darted into the hallway of a desolate tenement.

Halsyon began to climb the stairs. He went up three at a clip, then two, then struggled step by step as his strength failed and panic paralyzed him. He stumbled at a landing and fell against a door. The door opened. The Faraway Fiend stood within, smiling briskly, rubbing his hands.

"Glückliche Reise," he said. "On the dot. God damn. You twenty-three skidooed, eh? Enter, my old. I'm expecting you. Be it never so humble . . ."

Halsyon screamed. . . .

"No, no, no! No Sturm und Drang, my beauty." Mr. Aquila clapped a hand over Halsyon's mouth, heaved him up, dragged him through the doorway and slammed the door.

"Presto-changeo," he laughed. "Exit Jeffrey Halsyon from mortal ken. Dieu vous garde."

Halsyon freed his mouth, screamed again and fought hysterically, biting and kicking. Mr. Aquila made a clucking noise, dipped into his pocket and brought out a package of cigarettes. He flipped one up expertly and broke it under Halsyon's nose. The artist at once subsided and suffered himself to be led to a couch, where Aquila cleansed the ink from his face and hands.

"Better, eh?" Mr. Aquila chuckled. "Non habit forming. God damn. Drinks now called for."

He filled a shot glass from a decanter, added a tiny cube of purple ice from a fuming bucket, and placed the drink in Halsyon's hand. Compelled by a gesture from Aquila, the artist drank it off. It made his brain buzz. He stared around, breathing heavily. He was in what appeared to be the luxurious waiting room of a Park Avenue physician. Queen Anne furniture. Axminster rug. Two Morlands and a Crome on the wall in gilt frames. They were genuine, Halsyon realized with amazement. Then, with even more amazement, he realized that he was thinking with coherence, with continuity. His mind was quite clear.

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He passed a heavy hand over his forehead. "What's happened?" he asked faintly. "There's like . . . Something like a fever behind me. Nightmares."

"You have been sick," Aquila replied. "I am blunt, my old. This is a temporary return to sanity. It is no feat, God damn. Any doctor can do it. Niacin plus carbon dioxide. Id genus omne. We must search for something more permanent."

"What's this place?"

"Here? My office. Anteroom without. Consultation room within. Laboratory to left. In God we trust."

"I know you," Halsyon mumbled. "I know you from somewhere. I know your face."

"Oui. You have drawn and redrawn and tredrawn me in your fever. Ecce homo. But you have the advantage, Halsyon. Where have we met? I ask myself." Aquila put on a brilliant speculum, tilted it over his left eye and let it shine into Halsyon's face. "Now I ask you. Where have we met?"

Blinded by the light, Halsyon answered dreamily. "At the Beaux Arts Ball. . . . A long time ago. . . . Before the fever. . . ."

"Ah? Si. It was ½ year ago. I was there. An unfortunate night."

"No. A glorious night. . . . Gay, happy, fun. . . . Like a school dance . . . Like a prom in costume. . . ."

"Always back to the childhood, eh?" Mr. Aquila murmured. "We must attend to that. Cetera desunt, young Lochinvar. Continue."

"I was with Judy. . . . We realized we were in love that night. We realized how wonderful life was going to be. And then you passed and looked at me. . . . Just once. You looked at me. It was horrible."

"Tk!" Mr. Aquila clicked his tongue in vexation. "Now I remember said incident. I was unguarded. Bad news from home. A pox on both my houses."

"You passed in red and black. . . . Satanic. Wearing no mask. You looked at me. . . . A red and black look I never forgot. A look from black eyes like pools of hell, like cold fires of terror. And with that look you robbed me of everything . . . of joy, of hope, of love, of life. . . ."

"No, no!" Mr. Aquila said sharply. "Let us understand ourselves. My carelessness was the key that unlocked the door. But you fell into a chasm of your own making. Nevertheless, old beer & skittles, we must alter same." He removed the speculum and shook his finger at Halsyon. "We must bring you back to the land of the living. Auxilium ab alto. Jeez. That is for why I have arranged this meeting. What I have done I will undone, eh? But you must climb out of your own chasm. Knit up the ravelled sleave of care. Come inside."

He took Halsyon's arm, led him down a paneled hall, past a neat office

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and into a spanking white laboratory. It was all tile and glass with shelves of reagent bottles, porcelain filters, an electric oven, stock jars of acids, bins of raw materials. There was a small round elevation in the center of the floor, a sort of dais. Mr. Aquila placed a stool on the dais, placed Halsyon on the stool, got into a white lab coat and began to assemble apparatus.

"You," he chatted, "are an artist of the utmost. I do not dorer la pilule. When Jimmy Derelict told me you were no longer at work, God damn! We must return him to his muttons, I said. Solon Aquila must own many canvases of Jeffrey Halsyon. We shall cure him. Hoc age."

"You're a doctor?" Halsyon asked.

"No. Let us say, a warlock. Strictly speaking, a witch-pathologist. Very highclass. No nostrums. Strictly modern magic. Black magic and white magic are passé, n'est-ce-pas? I cover entire spectrum, specializing mostly in the 15,000 angstrom band."

"You're a witch-doctor? Never!"

"Oh yes."

"In this kind of place?"

"Ah-ha? You too are deceived, eh? It is our camouflage. Many a modern laboratory you think concerns itself with science is devoted to magic. But we are scientific too. Parbleu! We move with the times, we warlocks. Witch's Brew now complies with Pure Food & Drug Act. Familiars 100 per cent sterile. Sanitary brooms. Cellophane-wrapped curses. Father Satan in rubber gloves. Thanks to Lord Lister; or is it Pasteur? My idol."

The witch-pathologist gathered raw materials, consulted an ephemeris, ran off some calculations on an electronic computer and continued to chat.

"Fugit hora," Aquila said. "Your trouble, my old, is loss of sanity. Oui? Lost in one damn flight from reality and one damn desperate search for peace brought on by one unguarded look from me to you. Hélas! I apologize for that, R.S.V.P." With what looked like a miniature tennis line-marker, he rolled a circle around Halsyon on the dais. "But your trouble is, to wit: You search for the peace of infancy. You should be fighting to acquire the peace of maturity, n'est-ce-pas? Jeez."

Aquila drew circles and pentagons with a glittering compass and rule, weighed out powders on a micro-beam balance, dropped various liquids into crucibles from calibrated burettes, and continued: "Many warlocks do brisk trade in potions from Fountains of Youths. Oh yes. Are many youths and many fountains; but none for you. No. Youth is not for artists. Age is the cure. We must purge your youth and grow you up, nicht wahr?"

"No," Halsyon argued. "No. Youth is the art. Youth is the dream. Youth is the blessing."

"For some, yes. For many, not. Not for you. You are cursed, my adoles-

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cent. We must purge you. Lust for power. Lust for sex. Injustice collecting. Escape from reality. Passion for revenges. Oh yes, Father Freud is also my idol. We wipe your slate clean at very small price."

"What price?"

"You will see when we are finished."

Mr. Aquila deposited liquids and powders around the helpless artist in crucibles and petri dishes. He measured and cut fuses, set up a train from the circle to an electric timer which he carefully adjusted. He went to a shelf of serum bottles, took down a small Woulff vial numbered 5-271-009, filled a syringe and meticulously injected Halsyon.

"We begin," he said, "the purge of your dreams. Voilà!"

He tripped the electric timer and stepped behind a lead shield. There was a moment of silence. Suddenly black music crashed from a concealed loudspeaker and a recorded voice began an intolerable chant. In quick succession, the powders and liquids around Halsyon burst into flame. He was engulfed in music and fire fumes. The world began to spin around him in a roaring confusion. . . .

The president of the United Nations came to him. He was tall and gaunt, sprightly but bitter. He was wringing his hands in dismay.

"Mr. Halsyon! Mr. Halsyon!" he cried. "Where you been, my cupcake? God damn. Hoc tempore. Do you know what has happened?"

"No," Halsyon answered. "What's happened?"

"After your escape from the looney bin. Bango! H-bombs everywhere. The two hour war. It is over. Hora fugit, old faithful. Virility is over."

"What!"

"Hard radiation, Mr. Halsyon, has destroyed the virility of the world. God damn. You are the only man left capable of engendering children. No doubt on account of a mysterious mutant strain in your makeup which it makes you different. Jeeze."

"No."

"Oui. It is your responsibility to repopulate the world. We have taken for you a suite at the Odeon. It has three bedrooms. Three, my favorite. A prime number."

"Hot dog!" Halsyon said. "This is my big dream."

His progress to the Odeon was a triumph. He was garlanded with flowers, serenaded, hailed and cheered. Ecstatic women displayed themselves wickedly before him, begging for his attention. In his suite, Halsyon was wined and dined. A tall, gaunt man entered subserviently. He was sprightly but bitter. He had a list in his hand.

"I am World Procurer at your service, Mr. Halsyon," he said. He con-

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sulted his list. "God damn. Are 5,271,009 virgins clamoring for your attention. All guaranteed beautiful. Ewig-Weibliche. Pick a number from one to 5,000,000."

"We'll start with a redhead," Halsyon said.

They brought him a redhead. She was slender, boyish, with a small hard bosom. The next was fuller with a rollicking rump. The fifth was Junoesque and her breasts were like African pears. The tenth was a voluptuous Rembrandt. The twentieth was wiry. The thirtieth was slender and boyish with a small hard bosom.

"Haven't we met before?" Halsyon inquired.

"No," she said.

The next was fuller with a rollicking rump.

"The body is familiar," Halsyon said.

"No," she answered.

The fiftieth was Junoesque with breasts like African pears.

"Surely?" Halsyon said.

"Never," she answered.

The World Procurer entered with Halsyon's morning aphrodisiac.

"Never touch the stuff," Halsyon said.

"God damn," the Procurer exclaimed. "You are a veritable giant. An elephant. No wonder you are the beloved Adam. Tant soit peu. No wonder they all weep for love of you." He drank off the aphrodisiac himself.

"Have you noticed they're all getting to look alike?" Halsyon complained.

"But no! Are all different. Parbleu! This is an insult to my office."

"Oh, they're different from one to another, but the types keep repeating."

"Ah? This is life, my old. All life is cyclic. Have you not, as an artist, noticed?"

"I didn't think it applied to love."

"To all things. Wahrheit und Dichtung."

"What was that you said about them weeping?"

"Oui. They all weep."

"Why?"

"For ecstatic love of you. God damn."

Halsyon thought over the succession of boyish, rollicking, Junoesque, Rembrandtesque, wiry, red, blonde, brunette, white, black and brown women.

"I hadn't noticed," he said.

"Observe today, my world father. Shall we commence?"

It was true. Halsyon hadn't noticed. They all wept. He was flattered but depressed.

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"Why don't you laugh a little?" he asked.

They would not or could not.

Upstairs on the Odeon roof where Halsyon took his afternoon exercise, he questioned his trainer who was a tall, gaunt man with a sprightly but bitter expression.

"Ah?" said the trainer. "God damn. I don't know, old scotch & soda. Perhaps because it is a traumatic experience for them."

"Traumatic?" Halsyon puffed. "Why? What do I do to them?"

"Ah-ha? You joke, eh? All the world knows what you do to them."

"No, I mean . . . How can it be traumatic? They're all fighting to get to me, aren't they? Don't I come up to expectations?"

"A mystery. Tripotage. Now, beloved father of the world, we practice the push-ups. Ready? Begin."

Downstairs, in the Odeon restaurant, Halsyon questioned the headwaiter, a tall, gaunt man with a sprightly manner but bitter expression.

"We are men of the world, Mr. Halsyon. Suo jure. Surely you understand. These women love you and can expect no more than one night of love. God damn. Naturally they are disappointed."

"What do they want?"

"What every woman wants, my gateway to the west. A permanent relationship. Marriage."

"Marriage!"

"Oui."

"All of them?"

"Oui."

"All right. I'll marry all 5,271,009."

But the World Procurer objected. "No, no, no, young Lochinvar. God damn. Impossible. Aside from religious difficulties there are human also. God damn. Who could manage such a harem?"

"Then I'll marry one."

"No, no, no. Pensez à moi. How could make the choice? How could you select? By lottery, drawing straws, tossing coins?"

"I've already selected one."

"Ah? Which?"

"My girl," Halsyon said slowly. "Judith Field."

"So. Your sweetheart?"

"Yes."

"She is far down on the list of 5,000,000."

"She's always been number one on my list. I want Judith." Halsyon sighed. "I remember how she looked at the Beaux Arts Ball. . . . There was a full moon. . . ."

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"But there will be no full moon until the twenty-sixth."

"I want Judith."

"The others will tear her apart out of jealousy. No, no, no, Mr. Halsyon, we must stick to the schedule. One night for all, no more for any."

"I want Judith . . . or else."

"It will have to be discussed in council. God damn."

It was discussed in the U. N. council by a dozen delegates, all tall, gaunt, sprightly but bitter. It was decided to permit Jeffrey Halsyon one secret marriage.

"But no domestic ties," the World Procurer warned. "No faithfulness to your wife. That must be understood. We cannot spare you from our program. You are indispensable."

They brought the lucky Judith Field to the Odeon. She was a tall, dark girl with cropped curly hair and lovely tennis legs. Halsyon took her hand. The World Procurer tip-toed out.

"Hello, darling," Halsyon murmured.

Judith looked at him with loathing. Her eyes were wet, her face bruised from weeping.

"Hello, darling," Halsyon repeated.

"If you touch me, Jeff," Judith said in a strangled voice, "I'll kill you."

"Judy!"

"That disgusting man explained everything to me. He didn't seem to understand when I tried to explain to him . . . I was praying you'd be dead before it was my turn."

"But this is marriage, Judy."

"I'd rather die than be married to you."

"I don't believe you. We've been in love for —"

"For God's sake, Jeff, love's over for you. Don't you understand? Those women cry because they hate you. I hate you. The world loathes you. You're disgusting."

Halsyon stared at the girl and saw the truth in her face. In an excess of rage he tried to seize her. She fought him bitterly. They careened around the huge living room of the suite, overturning furniture, their breath hissing, their fury mounting. Halsyon struck Judith Field with his big fist to end the struggle once and for all. She reeled back, clutched at a drape, smashed through a french window and fell fourteen floors to the street like a gyrating doll.

Halsyon looked down in horror. A crowd gathered around the smashed body. Faces upturned. Fists shook. An ominous growl began. The World Procurer dashed into the suite.

"My old! My blue!" he cried. "What have you done? Per conto. It is a

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spark that will ignite savagery. You are in very grave danger. God damn."

"Is it true they all hate me?"

"Hélas, then you have discovered the truth? That indiscreet girl. I warned her. Oui. You are loathed."

"But you told me I was loved. The new Adam. Father of the new world."

"Oui. You are the father, but what child does not hate its father? You are also a legal rapist. What woman does not hate being forced to embrace a man . . . even by necessity for survival? Come quickly, my rock & rye. Passim. You are in great danger."

He dragged Halsyon to a back elevator and took him down to the Odeon cellar.

"The army will get you out. We take you to Turkey at once and effect a compromise."

Halsyon was transferred to the custody of a tall, gaunt, bitter army colonel who rushed him through underground passages to a side street where a staff car was waiting. The colonel thrust Halsyon inside.

"Jacta alea est," he said to the driver. "Speed, my corporal. Protect old faithful. To the airport. Alors!"

"God damn, sir," the corporal replied. He saluted and started the car. As it twisted through the streets at breakneck speed, Halsyon glanced at him. He was a tall, gaunt man, sprightly but bitter.

"Kulturkampf der Menscheit," the corporal muttered. "Jeez!"

A giant barricade had been built across the street, improvised of ash barrels, furniture, overturned cars, traffic stanchions. The corporal was forced to brake the car. As he slowed for a U-turn, a mob of women appeared from doorways, cellars, stores. They were screaming. Some of them brandished improvised clubs.

"Excelsior!" the corporal cried. "God damn." He tried to pull his service gun out of its holster. The women yanked open the car doors and tore Halsyon and the corporal out. Halsyon broke free, struggled through the wild clubbing mob, dashed to the sidewalk, stumbled and dropped with a sickening yaw through an open coal chute. He shot down and spilled out into an endless black space. His head whirled. A stream of stars sailed before his eyes. . . .

And he drifted alone in space, a martyr, misunderstood, a victim of cruel injustice.

He was still chained to what had once been the wall of Cell 5, Block 27, Tier 100, Wing 9 of the Callisto Penetentiary until that unexpected gamma explosion had torn the vast fortress dungeon — vaster than the Chateau

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d'If — apart. That explosion, he realized, had been detonated by the Grssh.

His assets were his convict clothes, a helmet, one cylinder of O_2, his grim fury at the injustice that had been done him, and his knowledge of the secret of how the Grssh could be defeated in their maniacal quest for solar domination.

The Grssh, ghastly marauders from Omicron Ceti, space-degenerates, space-imperialists, cold-blooded, roachlike, depending for their metabolism upon the psychotic horrors which they engendered in man through mental control and upon which they fed, were rapidly conquering the Galaxy. They were irresistible, for they possessed the power of simul-kinesis . . . the ability to be in two places at the same time.

Against the vault of space, a dot of light moved, slowly, like a stricken meteor. It was a rescue ship, Halsyon realized, combing space for survivors of the explosion. He wondered whether the light of Jupiter, flooding him with rusty radiation, would make him visible to the rescuers. He wondered whether he wanted to be rescued at all.

"It will be the same thing again," Halsyon grated. "Falsely accused by Balorsen's robot . . . Falsely convicted by Judith's father . . . Repudiated by Judith herself . . . Jailed again . . . and finally destroyed by the Grssh as they destroy the last strongholds of Terra. Why not die now?"

But even as he spoke he realized he lied. He was the one man with the one secret that could save the earth and the very Galaxy itself. He must survive. He must fight.

With indomitable will, Halsyon struggled to his feet, fighting the constricting chains. With the steely strength he had developed as a penal laborer in the Grssh mines, he waved and shouted. The spot of light did not alter its slow course away from him. Then he saw the metal link of one of his chains strike a brilliant spark from the flinty rock. He resolved on a desperate expedient to signal the rescue ship.

He detached the plasti-hose of the O_2 tank from his plasti-helmet, and permitted the stream of life-giving oxygen to spurt into space. With trembling hands, he gathered the links of his leg chain and dashed them against the rock under the oxygen. A spark glowed. The oxygen caught fire. A brilliant geyser of white flame spurted for half a mile into space.

Husbanding the last oxygen in his plasti-helmet, Halsyon twisted the cylinder slowly, sweeping the fan of flame back and forth in a last desperate bid for rescue. The atmosphere in his plasti-helmet grew foul and acrid. His ears roared. His sight flickered. At last his senses failed. . . .

When he recovered consciousness he was in a plasti-cot in the cabin of a starship. The high frequency whine told him they were in overdrive. He opened his eyes. Balorsen stood before the plasti-cot, and Balorsen's robot,

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and High Judge Field, and his daughter Judith. Judith was weeping. The robot was in magnetic clamps and winced as General Balorsen lashed him again and again with a nuclear whip.

"Parbleu! God damn!" the robot grated. "It is true I framed Jeff Halsyon. Ouch! Flux de bouche. I was the space-pirate who space-hijacked the space-freighter. God damn. Ouch! The bartender in the Spaceman's Saloon was my accomplice. When Jackson wrecked the heli-cab I went to the space-garage and X-beamed the sonic *before* Tantial murdered O'Leary. Aux armes. Jeez. Ouch!"

"There you have the confession, Halsyon," General Balorsen grated. He was tall, gaunt, bitter. "By God. Ars est celare artem. You are innocent."

"I falsely condemned you, old faithful," Judge Field grated. He was tall, gaunt, bitter. "Can you forgive this God damn fool? We apologize."

"We wronged you, Jeff," Judith whispered. "How can you ever forgive us? Say you forgive us."

"You're sorry for the way you treated me," Halsyon grated. "But it's only because on account of a mysterious mutant strain in my makeup which it makes me different, I'm the one man with the one secret that can save the galaxy from the Grssh."

"No, no, no, old gin & tonic," General Balorsen pleaded. "God damn. Don't hold grudges. Save us from the Grssh."

"Save us, faute de mieux, save us, Jeff," Judge Field put in.

"Oh please, Jeff, please," Judith whispered. "The Grssh are everywhere and coming closer. We're taking you to the U. N. You must tell the council how to stop the Grssh from being in two places at the same time."

The starship came out of overdrive and landed on Governor's Island where a delegation of world dignitaries met the ship and rushed Halsyon to the General Assembly room of the U. N. They drove down the strangely rounded streets lined with strangely rounded buildings which had all been altered when it was discovered that the Grssh always appeared in corners. There was not a corner or an angle left on all Terra.

The General Assembly was filled when Halsyon entered. Hundreds of tall, gaunt, bitter diplomats applauded as he made his way to the podium, still dressed in convict plasti-clothes. Halsyon looked around resentfully.

"Yes," he grated. "You all applaud. You all revere me now; but where were you when I was framed, convicted and jailed . . . an innocent man? Where were you then?"

"Halsyon, forgive us. God damn!" they shouted.

"I will not forgive you. I suffered for seventeen years in the Grssh mines. Now it's your turn to suffer."

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"Please, Halsyon!"

"Where are your experts? Your professors? Your specialists? Where are your electronic calculators? Your super thinking machines? Let them solve the mystery of the Grssh."

"They can't, old whiskey & sour. Entre nous. They're stopped cold. Save us, Halsyon. Auf wiedersehen."

Judith took his arm. "Not for my sake, Jeff," she whispered. "I know you'll never forgive me for the injustice I did you. But for the sake of all the other girls in the Galaxy who love and are loved."

"I still love you, Judy."

"I've always loved you, Jeff."

"Okay. I didn't want to tell them but you talked me into it." Halsyon raised his hand for silence. In the ensuing hush he spoke softly. "The secret is this, gentlemen. Your calculators have assembled data to ferret out the secret weakness of the Grssh. They have not been able to find any. Consequently you have assumed that the Grssh have no secret weakness. *That was a wrong assumption.*"

The General Assembly held its breath.

"Here is the secret. *You should have assumed there was something wrong with the calculators.*"

"God damn!" the General Assembly cried. "Why didn't we think of that? God damn!"

"*And I know what's wrong!*"

There was a deathlike hush.

The door of the General Assembly burst open. Professor Deathhush, tall, gaunt, bitter, tottered in. "Eureka!" he cried. "I've found it. God damn. Something wrong with the thinking machines. Three comes *after* two, not before."

The General Assembly exploded into cheers. Professor Deathhush was seized and pummeled happily. Bottles were opened. His health was drunk. Several medals were pinned on him. He beamed.

"Hey!" Halsyon called. "That was my secret. I'm the one man who on account of a mysterious mutant strain in my —"

The ticker-tape began pounding: ATTENTION. ATTENTION. HUSHENKOV IN MOSCOW REPORTS DEFECT IN CALCULATORS. 3 COMES AFTER 2 AND NOT BEFORE. REPEAT: AFTER (UNDERSCORE) NOT BEFORE.

A postman ran in. "Special delivery from Doctor Lifehush at Caltech. Says something's wrong with the thinking machines. Three comes after two, not before."

A telegraph boy delivered a wire: THINKING MACHINE WRONG STOP TWO COMES BEFORE THREE STOP NOT AFTER STOP. VON DREAMHUSH, HEIDELBERG.

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A bottle was thrown through the window. It crashed on the floor revealing a bit of paper on which was scrawled: *Did you ever stopp to thinc that maibe the nomber 3 comes after 2 insted of in front? Down with the Grish. Mr. Hush-Hush.*

Halsyon buttonholed Judge Field. "What the hell is this?" he demanded. "I thought I was the one man in the world with that secret."

"HimmelHerrGott!" Judge Field replied impatiently. "You are all alike. You dream you are the one men with a secret, the one men with a wrong, the one men with an injustice, with a girl, without a girl, with or without anything. God damn. You bore me, you one-man dreamers. Get lost."

Judge Field shouldered him aside. General Balorsen shoved him back. Judith Field ignored him. Balorsen's robot sneakily tripped him into a corner where a Grssh, also in a corner on Neptune, appeared, did something unspeakable to Halsyon and disappeared with him, screaming, jerking and sobbing into a horror that was a delicious meal for the Grssh but an agonizing nightmare for Halsyon. . . .

From which his mother awakened him and said, "This'll teach you not to sneak peanut-butter sandwiches in the middle of the night, Jeffrey."

"Mama?"

"Yes. It's time to get up, dear. You'll be late for school."

She left the room. He looked around. He looked at himself. It was true. True! The glorious realization came upon him. His dream had come true. He was ten years old again, in the flesh that was his ten-year-old body, in the home that was his boyhood home, in the life that had been his life in the nineteen thirties. And within his head was the knowledge, the experience, the sophistication of a man of thirty-three.

"Oh joy!" he cried. "It'll be a triumph. A triumph!"

He would be the school genius. He would astonish his parents, amaze his teachers, confound the experts. He would win scholarships. He would settle the hash of that kid Rennahan who used to bully him. He would hire a typewriter and write all the successful plays and stories and novels he remembered. He would cash in on that lost opportunity with Judy Field behind the memorial in Isham Park. He would steal inventions, discoveries, get in on the ground floor of new industries, make bets, play the stock-market. He would own the world by the time he caught up with himself.

He dressed with difficulty. He had forgotten where his clothes were kept. He ate breakfast with difficulty. This was no time to explain to his mother that he'd gotten into the habit of starting the day with coffee laced with rye. He missed his morning cigarette. He had no idea where his schoolbooks were. His mother had trouble starting him out.

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"Jeff's in one of his moods," he heard her mutter. "I hope he gets through the day."

The day started with Rennahan laying for him on the corner opposite the Boy's Entrance. Halsyon remembered him as a big tough kid with a vicious expression. He was astonished to discover that Rennahan was skinny, harassed and obviously compelled by some bedevilments to be omnivorously aggressive.

"Why, you're not hostile to me," Halsyon exclaimed. "You're just a mixed-up kid who's trying to prove something."

Rennahan punched him.

"Look, kid," Halsyon said kindly. "You really want to be friends with the world. You're just insecure. That's why you're compelled to fight."

Rennahan was deaf to spot analysis. He punched Halsyon harder. It hurt.

"Oh leave me alone," Halsyon said. "Go prove yourself on somebody else."

Rennahan, with two swift motions, knocked Halsyon's books from under his arm and ripped his fly. There was nothing for it but to fight. Twenty years of watching films of the future Joe Louis did nothing for Halsyon. He was thoroughly licked. He was also late for school. Now was his chance to amaze his teachers.

"The fact is," he explained to Miss Ralph of the fifth grade, "I had a run-in with a neurotic. I can speak for his left hook but I won't answer for his Id."

Miss Ralph slapped him and sent him to the principal with a note, reporting unheard-of insolence.

"The only thing unheard of in this school," Halsyon told Mr. Snider, "is psychoanalysis. How can you pretend to be competent teachers if you don't —"

"Dirty little boy!" Mr. Snider interrupted angrily. He was tall, gaunt, bitter. "So you've been reading dirty books, eh?"

"What the hell's dirty about Freud?"

"And using profane language, eh? You need a lesson, you filthy little animal."

He was sent home with a note requesting an immediate consultation with his parents regarding the withdrawal of Jeffrey Halsyon from school as a degenerate in desperate need of correction and vocational guidance.

Instead of going home he went to a newsstand to check the papers for events on which to get a bet down. The headlines were full of the pennant race. But who the hell won the pennant in 1931? And the series? He couldn't for the life of him remember. And the stock market? He couldn't remember anything about that either. He'd never been particularly interested in

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such matters as a boy. There was nothing planted in his memory to call upon.

He tried to get into the library for further checks. The librarian, tall, gaunt, bitter, would not permit him to enter until children's hour in the afternoon. He loafed on the streets. Wherever he loafed he was chased by gaunt and bitter adults. He was beginning to realize that ten-year-old boys had limited opportunities to amaze the world.

At lunch hour he met Judy Field and accompanied her home from school. He was appalled by her knobby knees and black corkscrew curls. He didn't like the way she smelled either. But he was rather taken with her mother who was the image of the Judy he remembered. He forgot himself with Mrs. Field and did one or two things that indeed confounded her. She drove him out of the house and then telephoned his mother, her voice shaking with indignation.

Halsyon went down to the Hudson River and hung around the ferry docks until he was chased. He went to a stationery store to inquire about typewriter rentals and was chased. He searched for a quiet place to sit, think, plan, perhaps begin the recall of a successful story. There was no quiet place to which a small boy would be admitted.

He slipped into his house at 4:30, dropped his books in his room, stole into the living room, sneaked a cigarette and was on his way out when he discovered his mother and father ambushing him. His mother looked shocked. His father looked gaunt and bitter.

"Oh," Halsyon said. "I suppose Snider phoned. I'd forgotten about that."

"*Mister* Snider," his mother said.

"And Mrs. Field," his father said.

"Look," Halsyon began. "We'd better get this straightened out. Will you listen to me for a few minutes? I have something startling to tell you and we've got to plan what to do about it. I —"

He yelped. His father had taken him by the ear and was marching him down the hall. Parents did not listen to children for a few minutes. They did not listen at all.

"Pop. . . . Just a minute. . . . Please! I'm trying to explain. I'm not really ten years old. I'm 33. There's been a freak in time, see? On account of a mysterious mutant strain in my makeup which —"

"Damn you! Be quiet!" his father shouted. The pain of his big hands, the suppressed fury in his voice silenced Halsyon. He suffered himself to be led out of the house, four agonizing blocks to the school, and up one flight to Mr. Snider's office where a public school psychologist was waiting with the principal. He was a tall man, gaunt, bitter, but sprightly.

"Ah yes, yes," he said. "So this is our little degenerate. Our Scarface Al Capone, eh? Come, we take him to the clinic and there I shall take his

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journal intime. We will hope for the best. Nisi prius. He cannot be all bad."

He took Halsyon's arm. Halsyon pulled his arm away and said, "Listen, you're an adult, intelligent man. You'll listen to me. My father's got emotional problems that blind him to the —"

His father gave him a tremendous box on the ear, grabbed his arm and thrust it back into the psychologist's grasp. Halsyon burst into tears. The psychologist led him out of the office and into the tiny school clinic. Halsyon was hysterical. He was trembling with frustration and terror.

"Won't anybody listen to me?" he sobbed. "Won't anybody try to understand? Is this what we're all like to kids? Is this what all kids go through?"

"Gently, my sausage," the psychologist murmured. He popped a pill into Halsyon's mouth and forced him to drink some water.

"You're all so damned inhuman," Halsyon wept. "You keep us out of your world, but you keep barging into ours. If you don't respect us why don't you leave us alone?"

"You begin to understand, eh?" the psychologist said. "We are two different breeds of animals, childrens and adults. God damn. I speak to you with frankness. Les absents ont toujours tort. There is no meetings of the minds. Jeez. There is nothing but war. It is why all childrens grow up hating their childhoods and searching for revenges. But there is never revenges. Pari mutuel. How can there be? Can a cat insult a king?"

"It's . . . S'hateful," Halsyon mumbled. The pill was taking effect rapidly. "Whole world's hateful. Full of conflicts'n'insults 'at can't be r'solved . . . or paid back. . . . S'like a joke somebody's playin' on us. Silly joke without point. Isn't?"

As he slid down into darkness, he could hear the psychologist chuckle, but couldn't for the life of him understand what he was laughing at. . . .

He picked up his spade and followed the first clown into the cemetery. The first clown was a tall man, gaunt, bitter, but sprightly.

"Is she to be buried in Christian burial that wilfully seeks her own salvation?" the first clown asked.

"I tell thee she is," Halsyon answered. "And therefore make her grave straight: the crowner hath sat on her, and finds it Christian burial."

"How can that be, unless she drowned herself in her own defense?"

"Why, 'tis found so."

They began to dig the grave. The first clown thought the matter over, then said, "It must be *se offendendo;* it cannot be else. For here lies the point: if I drown myself wittingly, it argues an act: and an act hath three branches; it is, to act, to do, to perform: argal, she drowned herself wittingly."

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"Nay, but hear you, goodman delver —" Halsyon began.

"Give me leave," the first clown interrupted and went on with a tiresome discourse on quest-law. Then he turned sprightly and cracked a few professional jokes. At last Halsyon got away and went down to Yaughan's for a drink. When he returned, the first clown was cracking jokes with a couple of gentlemen who had wandered into the graveyard. One of them made quite a fuss about a skull.

The burial procession arrived; the coffin, the dead girl's brother, the king and queen, the priests and lords. They buried her, and the brother and one of the gentlemen began to quarrel over her grave. Halsyon paid no attention. There was a pretty girl in the procession, dark, with cropped curly hair and lovely long legs. He winked at her. She winked back. Halsyon edged over toward her, speaking with his eyes and she answered him saucily the same way.

Then he picked up his spade and followed the first clown into the cemetery. The first clown was a tall man, gaunt, with a bitter expression but a sprightly manner.

"Is she to be buried in Christian burial that wilfully seeks her own salvation?" the first clown asked.

"I tell thee she is," Halsyon answered. "And therefore make her grave straight: the crowner hath sat on her, and finds it Christian burial."

"How can that be, unless she drowned herself in her own defense?"

"Didn't you ask me that before?" Halsyon inquired.

"Shut up, old faithful. Answer the question."

"I could swear this happened before."

"God damn. Will you answer? Jeez."

"Why, 'tis found so."

They began to dig the grave. The first clown thought the matter over and began a long discourse on quest-law. After that he turned sprightly and cracked trade jokes. At last Halsyon got away and went down to Yaughan's for a drink. When he returned there were a couple of strangers at the grave and then the burial procession arrived.

There was a pretty girl in the procession, dark, with cropped curly hair and lovely long legs. Halsyon winked at her. She winked back. Halsyon edged over toward her, speaking with his eyes and she answering him the same way.

"What's your name?" he whispered.

"Judith," she answered.

"I have your name tattooed on me, Judith."

"You're lying, sir."

"I can prove it, Madam. I'll show you where I was tattooed."

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"And where is that?"

"In Yaughan's tavern. It was done by a sailor off the Golden Hind. Will you see it with me tonight?"

Before she could answer, he picked up his spade and followed the first clown into the cemetery. The first clown was a tall man, gaunt, with a bitter expression but a sprightly manner.

"For God's sake!" Halsyon complained. "I could swear this happened before."

"Is she to be buried in Christian burial that wilfully seeks her own salvation?" the first clown asked.

"I just know we've been through all this."

"Will you answer the question!"

"Listen," Halsyon said doggedly. "Maybe I'm crazy; maybe not. But I've got a spooky feeling that all this happened before. It seems unreal. Life seems unreal."

The first clown shook his head. "HimmelHerrGott," he muttered. "It is as I feared. Lux et veritas. On account of a mysterious mutant strain in your makeup which it makes you different, you are treading on thin water. Ewigkeit! Answer the question."

"If I've answered it once, I've answered it a hundred times."

"Old ham & eggs," the first clown burst out, "you have answered it 5,271,009 times. God damn. Answer again."

"Why?"

"Because you must. Pot au feu. It is the life we must live."

"You call this life? Doing the same things over and over again? Saying the same things? Winking at girls and never getting any further?"

"No, no, no, my Donner und Blitzen. Do not question. It is a conspiracy we dare not fight. This is the life every man lives. Every man does the same things over and over. There is no escape."

"Why is there no escape?"

"I dare not say; I dare not. Vox populi. Others have questioned and disappeared. It is a conspiracy. I'm afraid."

"Afraid of what?"

"Of our owners."

"What? We are owned?"

"Si. Ach, ja! All of us, young mutant. There is no reality. There is no life, no freedom, no will. God damn. Don't you realize? We are . . . We are all characters in a book. As the book is read, we dance our dances; when the book is read again, we dance again. E pluribus unum. Is she to be buried in Christian burial that wilfully seeks her own salvation?"

"What are you saying?" Halsyon cried in horror. "We're puppets?"

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"Answer the question."

"If there's no freedom, no free will, how can we be talking like this?"

"Whoever's reading our book is day-dreaming, my capitol of Dakota. Idem est. Answer the question."

"I will not. I'm going to revolt. I'll dance for our owners no longer. I'll find a better life. . . . I'll find reality."

"No, no! It's madness, Jeffrey! Cul-de-sac!"

"All we need is one brave leader. The rest will follow. We'll smash the conspiracy that chains us!"

"It cannot be done. Play it safe. Answer the question."

Halsyon answered the question by picking up his spade and bashing in the head of the first clown who appeared not to notice. "Is she to be buried in Christian burial that wilfully seeks her own salvation?" he asked.

"Revolt!" Halsyon cried and bashed him again. The clown started to sing. The two gentlemen appeared. One said: "Has this fellow no feeling of business that he sings at grave-making?"

"Revolt! Follow me!" Halsyon shouted and swung his spade against the gentleman's melancholy head. He paid no attention. He chatted with his friend and the first clown. Halsyon whirled like a dervish, laying about him with his spade. The gentleman picked up a skull and philosophized over some person or persons named Yorick.

The funeral procession approached. Halsyon attacked it, whirling and turning, around and around with the clotted frenzy of a man in a dream.

"Stop reading the book," he shouted. "Let me out of the pages. Can you hear me? Stop reading the book! I'd rather be in a world of my own making. Let me go!"

There was a mighty clap of thunder, as of the covers of a mighty book slamming shut. In an instant Halsyon was swept spinning into the third compartment of the seventh circle of the Inferno in the fourteenth Canto of the Divine Comedy where they who have sinned against art are tormented by flakes of fire which are eternally showered down upon them. There he shrieked until he had provided sufficient amusement. Only then was he permitted to devise a text of his own . . . . and he formed a new world, a romantic world, a world of his fondest dreams. . . .

He was the last man on earth.

He was the last man on earth and he howled.

The hills, the valleys, the mountains and streams were his, his alone, and he howled.

5,271,009 houses were his for shelter. 5,271,009 beds were his for sleeping. The shops were his for the breaking and entering. The jewels of the world

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were his; the toys, the tools, the playthings, the necessities, the luxuries . . . all belonged to the last man on earth, and he howled.

He left the country mansion in the fields of Connecticut where he had taken up residence; he crossed into Westchester, howling; he ran south along what had once been the Hendrick Hudson Highway, howling; he crossed the bridge into Manhattan, howling; he ran downtown past lonely skyscrapers, department stores, amusement palaces, howling. He howled down Fifth Avenue, and at the corner of 50th Street he saw a human being.

She was alive, breathing; a beautiful woman. She was tall and dark with cropped curly hair and lovely long legs. She wore a white blouse, tiger-skin riding breeches and patent leather boots. She carried a rifle. She wore a revolver on her hip. She was eating stewed tomatoes from a can and she stared at Halsyon in unbelief. He howled. He ran up to her.

"I thought I was the last human on earth," she said.

"You're the last woman," Halsyon howled. "I'm the last man. Are you a dentist?"

"No," she said. "I'm the daughter of the unfortunate Professor Field whose well-intentioned but ill-advised experiment in nuclear fission has wiped mankind off the face of the earth with the exception of you and me, who, no doubt on account of some mysterious mutant strain in our makeup which it makes us different, are the last of the old civilization and the first of the new."

"Didn't your father teach you anything about dentistry?" Halsyon howled.

"No," she said.

"Then lend me your gun for a m[illegible]

She unholstered the revolver and handed it to Halsyon, meanwhile keeping her rifle ready. Halsyon cocked the gun.

"I wish you'd been a dentist," he howled.

"I'm a beautiful woman with an I.Q. of 141 which is more important for the propagation of a brave new beautiful race of men to inherit the good green earth," she said.

"Not with my teeth it isn't," Halsyon howled.

He clapped the revolver to his temple and blew his brains out.

He awoke with a splitting headache. He was lying on the tile dais alongside the stool, his bruised temple pressed against the cold floor. Mr. Aquila had emerged from the lead shield and was turning on an exhaust fan to clear the air.

"Bravo, my liver & onions," he chuckled. "The last one you did by yourself, eh? No assistance from yours truly required. Meglio tarde che

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mai. But you went over with a crack before I could catch you. God damn."

He helped Halsyon to his feet and led him into the consultation room where he seated him on a velvet chaise longue and gave him a glass of brandy.

"Guaranteed free of drugs," he said. "Noblesse oblige. Only the best spiritus frumenti. Now we discuss what we have done, eh? Jeez."

He sat down behind the desk, still sprightly, still bitter, and regarded Halsyon with kindliness. "Man lives by his decisions, n'est-ce-pas?" he began. "We agree, oui? A man has some five million two hundred seventy-one thousand and nine decisions to make in the course of his life. Peste! Is it a prime number? N'importe. Do you agree?"

Halsyon nodded.

"So, my coffee & doughnuts, it is the maturity of these decisions that decides whether a man is a man or a child. Nicht wahr? Malgré nous. A man cannot start making adult decisions until he has purged himself of the dreams of childhood. God damn. Such fantasies. They must go. Pfui."

"No," Halsyon said slowly. "It's the dreams that make my art . . . the dreams and fantasies that I translate into line and color. . . ."

"God damn! Yes. Agreed. Maître d'hôtel! But adult dreams, not baby dreams. Baby dreams. Pfui! All men have them. . . . To be the last man on earth and own the earth . . . To be the last fertile man on earth and own the women . . . To go back in time with the advantage of adult knowledge and win victories . . . To escape reality with the dream that life is make-believe . . . To escape responsibility with a fantasy of heroic injustice, of martyrdom with a happy ending . . . And there are hundreds more, equally popular, equally empty. God bless Father Freud and his merry men. He applies the quietus to such nonsense. Sic semper tyrannis. Avaunt!"

"But if everybody has those dreams, they can't be bad, can they?"

"For everybody read everybaby. Quid pro quo. God damn. Everybody in Fourteenth century had lice. Did that make it good? No, my young, such dreams are for childrens. Too many adults are still childrens. It is you, the artists, who must lead them out as I have led you. I purge you; now you purge them."

"Why did you do this?"

"Because I have faith in you. Sic vos non vobis. It will not be easy for you. A long hard road and lonely."

"I suppose I ought to feel grateful," Halsyon muttered, "but I feel . . . well . . . empty. Cheated."

"Oh yes, God damn. If you live with one Jeez big ulcer long enough you miss him when he's cut out. You were hiding in an ulcer. I have robbed

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you of said refuge. Ergo: you feel cheated. Wait! You will feel even more cheated. There was a price to pay, I told you. You have paid it. Look."

Mr. Aquila held up a hand mirror. Halsyon glanced into it, then started and stared. A fifty-year-old face stared back at him: lined, hardened, solid, determined. Halsyon leaped to his feet.

"Gently, gently," Mr. Aquila admonished. "It is not so bad: It is damned good. You are still 33 in age of physique. You have lost none of your life . . . only all of your youth. What have you lost? A pretty face to lure young girls? Is that why you are wild?"

"Christ!" Halsyon cried.

"All right. Still gently, my child. Here you are, purged, disillusioned, unhappy, bewildered, one foot on the hard road to maturity. Would you like this to have happened or not have happened? Si. I can do. This can never have happened. Spurlos versenkt. It is ten seconds from your escape. You can have your pretty young face back. You can be recaptured. You can return to the safe ulcer of the womb . . . a child again. Would you like same?"

"You can't!"

"Sauve qui peut, my Pike's Peak. I can. There is no end to the 15,000 angstrom band."

"Damn you! Are you Satan? Lucifer? Only the devil could have such powers."

"Or angels, my old."

"You don't look like an angel. You look like Satan."

"Ah? Ha? But Satan was an angel before he fell. He has many relations on high. Surely there are family resemblances. God damn." Mr. Aquila stopped laughing. He leaned across the desk and the sprightliness was gone from his face. Only the bitterness remained. "Shall I tell you who I am, my chicken? Shall I explain why one unguarded look from this phizz toppled you over the brink?"

Halsyon nodded, unable to speak.

"I am a scoundrel, a black sheep, a scapegrace, a blackguard. I am a remittance man. Yes. God damn! I am a remittance man." Mr. Aquila's eyes turned into wounds. "By your standards I am the great man of infinite power and variety. So was the remittance man from Europe to naive natives on the beaches of Tahiti. Eh? So am I to you as I comb the beaches of this planet for a little amusement, a little hope, a little joy to while away the weary desolate years of my exile. . . .

"I am bad," Mr. Aquila said in a voice of chilling desperation. "I am rotten. There is no place in my home that can tolerate me. And there are moments, unguarded, when my sickness and my despair fill my eyes and

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strike terror into your waiting souls. As I strike terror into you now. Yes?"

Halsyon nodded again.

"Be guided by me. It was the child in Solon Aquila that destroyed him and led him into the sickness that destroyed his life. Oui. I too suffer from baby fantasies from which I cannot escape. Do not make the same mistake. I beg of you. . . ." Mr. Aquila glanced at his wristwatch and leaped up. The sprightly returned to his manner. "Jeez. It's late. Time to make up your mind, old bourbon & soda. Which will it be? Old face or pretty face? The reality of dreams or the dream of reality?"

"How many decisions did you say we have to make in a lifetime?"

"Five million two hundred and seventy-one thousand and nine. Give or take a thousand. God damn."

"And which one is this for me?"

"Ah? Vérité sans peur. The two million six hundred and thirty-five thousand five hundred and fourth . . . off hand."

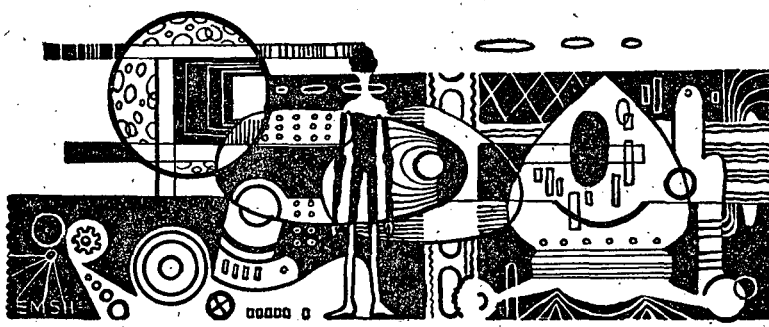
"But it's the big one."

"They are all big." Mr. Aquila stepped to the door, placed his hand on the buttons of a rather complicated switch and cocked an eye at Halsyon.

"Voilà tout," he said. "It rests with you."

"I'll take it the hard way," Halsyon decided.

There was a silver chime from the switch, a fizzing aura, a soundless explosion, and Jeffrey Halsyon was ready for his 2,635,505th decision.



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Miriam Allen deFord, as versatile a woman of letters as we know, has written for F&SF historical satire, supernatural folklore and critical biography — to say nothing of an extraordinarily varied series of murders, fictional and factual, for our sister publications, Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine *and* True Crime Detective. *Now she turns her attention to the quiet domestic type of science fiction — with singular horror welling up out of the familiar homey details of a life that might easily be yours.*

Mrs. Hinck

by MIRIAM ALLEN DEFORD

"I'D LIKE AN OLDER, more settled woman if I could get one — somebody reliable," Gwen said into the telephone. "I've had high school girls and they invite their friends and play the phonograph all hours and keep the children awake. . . . Two, a boy eight and a girl five. . . . Oh, that would be fine. Could she come tomorrow at 6?"

Mrs. Hinck arrived promptly on the hour, a comfortable, grandmotherly sort of person. Gav and Ada seemed to take to her at once. Best of all, Dale wouldn't have to drive her home when they got back; she came in her own little two-seater, which she parked outside.

"Give the children their supper as soon as we leave," Gwen instructed her. "It's all ready in the kitchen. Ada's bedtime is 8 and Gav can stay up till half-past. He can take care of himself, but you'll have to help Ada a little. And oh, yes, much as we deplore it" — Gwen made a little *moue* and Mrs. Hinck smiled sympathetically — "there's a riproaring program on television that they won't be happy without. It comes on at 7:30."

"Now don't you worry about anything," said Mrs. Hinck competently. "We're going to get along beautifully."

It was after 1 when Gwen and Dale got home. The only light was in the living room, where Mrs. Hinck sat placidly knitting something in yellow wool. She had even cleaned up the children's supper dishes. Gwen breathed a sigh of relief, remembering the high school girls.

"It's after midnight, so we owe you an hour overtime," Dale said.

"Nonsense," responded Mrs. Hinck. "I always sit up late anyhow, and I'm just knitting here instead of at home."

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Gwen and Dale exchanged incredulous glances.

"Would you have time to come often — say twice a week?" Gwen asked. She didn't want to be more specific till she found out how the kids had liked her. "I'll phone in the morning — what's your number?"

"I'm sorry, but I haven't any phone," said Mrs. Hinck apologetically. "Just call the agency — I check with them every day."

She folded the yellow wool into a knitting bag, put on her smart black hat and coat, and drove away.

"Well, kids, what happened to Roaring Roger last night?" Dale inquired genially at the breakfast table.

Gav and Ada stared at each other blankly.

"Well, for gosh sake!" Gav exploded. "We forgot all about him! Mrs. Hinck was telling us a story."

"Do you like her?"

"She's swell," they said in chorus.

It was grand, being able to get out again together. Gwen was a devoted mother, but you can't help being young and wanting a little fun sometimes. On Mrs. Hinck's second evening, they arranged for Wednesdays and Saturdays, regularly.

"And maybe an extra evening once in a while, if you're not too busy," Gwen said recklessly.

"Any time — just let the agency know. To tell the truth, this is all the baby-sitting I'm doing right now. But I'd love to come here whenever you say. I like children, and I get so lonesome for my own little granddaughter. This is a sweater for her that I'm knitting."

"How old is she?" Gwen asked.

"Just about a year older than your Ada. I miss her a lot."

"Isn't she here in the city?"

"Oh, no, my daughter lives abroad. She married a foreigner: Illinck is his name. I was with them for a while, but I don't know when I'll go back. I just got the wanderlust in my old age, and decided to travel, and now I seem to have settled down here. I do miss Mary, though — and my daughter too, of course. I guess Mary misses me too. She's an only child, and there are no other children around. I wish she had your little boy and girl to play with. They're lovely youngsters."

"We think so," Dale grinned. "Thanks a lot, incidentally, for weaning them from that blood-and-thunder TV program. How did you do it?"

"Oh, I just tell them stories," Mrs. Hinck said vaguely. "I guess they just get interested and forget the television. I did the same way with Mary when I was there. They don't have television, but it was the same thing with radio."

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"Illinck," Dale remarked after Mrs. Hinck had left. "That's a funny name — wonder what nationality he is?"

"I can't imagine. Don't let's ask any questions, Dale, there might be some family trouble. I noticed she didn't want to say much. And we don't want to offend her and lose her — we're too lucky."

"*I'm* the one that's lucky," Dale retorted, "getting a chance again to go places with my best girl."

Nevertheless, Gwen couldn't avoid a tiny unworthy twinge of jealousy when Gav and Ada began watching from the front window for Mrs. Hinck, and rushing to the door to greet her with hugs.

"Don't be a goof," she admonished herself. "She isn't stealing your kids' affections — they're as fond of us as ever. They just needed a grandmother, and she needed some grandchildren."

On summer evenings when it was still light after dinner and they weren't going anywhere, Dale would cut the grass or water the front garden while Gwen got rid of the dishes. That was the signal for Gav and Ada to perch on the bottom step of the porch and engage him in conversation.

"Daddy, why don't I have a grandmother?" That was Ada.

"You have — you've got two of them, and two grandfathers too, only they live way off at the other end of the country. They send you Christmas and birthday presents — don't you remember? Maybe some day one of them will visit us."

"Whenever Mrs. Hinck goes to visit her granddaughter, she takes her simply wonderful toys," said Ada wistfully.

"Well, if one of your grandmothers comes to see you, she'll bring you toys, too."

"Not like Mrs. Hinck," Ada objected stubbornly. "Mrs. Hinck brings Mary toys like nobody else in the world has — she told us so."

"Pig," remarked Gav. "Hey, daddy, can I hold the hose for a while now, huh?"

"I'm getting a trifle tired of Mrs. Hinck's little granddaughter," Dale commented later to Gwen. "She must be the worst spoiled brat in creation."

"She does seem kind of hipped on the subject, doesn't she? But she's lonely, I guess, poor old thing."

"Just so she doesn't give our kids grandiose ideas. Toys like none in the whole world — gosh!"

Another evening, and another gardening session.

"When Mrs. Hinck visits her granddaughter," said Gav informatively, "she doesn't use a train or a bus or a ship or a plane to get there."

"That's nice. What does she do — walk and swim?"

"No, she just *goes*."

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Curiosity overmastered Dale.

"She ever tell you the name of the country where her granddaughter lives?"

"Sure. It's called America, just like this one."

"America, eh? And what language do they speak there?"

"Why, English, just like us, of course."

Dale felt ashamed of his prying. Mrs. Hinck obviously had forestalled any possible inquiries on his or Gwen's part. He changed the subject.

"How's your granddaughter's sweater coming along?" Gwen asked Mrs. Hinck the next time she came.

"Almost done. I'm going to make a cap to match. It's for her seventh birthday. Some time this fall I might just pop over and visit there — I do miss Mary so much. How I wish I could take your two along! It would be wonderful for Mary."

"Yes, it's too bad it's so far away," Gwen answered absent-mindedly. Her heart sank. There would never be another Mrs. Hinck, and she and Dale had been having such good times together. "But you'd be back, wouldn't you?" she asked hopefully.

"Oh, I think so, unless — well, anyway, we needn't think about it yet."

That was in August. On Saturday night in the first week of October Dale and Gwen went to a party they hated to be the first ones to break up. It was after 3 when they drove up to their door.

"I feel guilty, keeping that poor old lady up so late," Gwen murmured.

"She's gone to sleep, I guess," Dale consoled her. "There's no light in the living room."

Gwen let out a startled cry.

"Dale!" she gasped. "Look — her car isn't here. She *couldn't* have gone home and left the children alone in the house — not Mrs. Hinck!"

They raced in. There was no one in the living room or anywhere else on the first floor. Together they ran upstairs, the same sudden terror in their hearts.

The two little bedrooms were dark, and the beds were empty. They had not been slept in.

Gwen's knees failed her. Dale dashed to the phone to call the police.

"Gwen," he shouted back from the hall, "what's the license number of Mrs. Hinck's car? I never noticed."

"I never did either," Gwen quavered.

It was almost dawn — with Gwen in tears and Dale pacing the floor — before the police called back. They'd found the license number at last, from the records, and they'd sent a man to the address Mrs. Hinck had given as hers. It was an all-night parking lot.

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The night man there knew Mrs. Hinck by sight, but he hadn't seen her since he came on duty at 8. She kept her car there all the time, paying by the month; that was all he knew.

The whole long day was a nightmare. Neither of them had slept, and they kept going on black coffee, for they couldn't eat. A detective had appeared early in the morning and looked at the children's rooms. Nothing of theirs or of their parents' was missing, and there were no signs of struggle, or any evidence that a disturber had been there.

"They were kidnaped, all right," the detective concluded. "But they must have gone voluntarily."

What does "voluntarily" mean, when it is applied to children of five and eight?

Dale told him about the daughter who had married a foreigner named Illinck and lived abroad.

"Never heard of such a name," said the detective. "That all you know about him? We'll send out a general alarm right away, of course, but I don't see how she could leave the country without a passport." He took out his notebook. "Now give me a full description of the little girl and boy. And this Mrs. Hinck — what does she look like?"

"About five feet five, rather plump, nicely curled white hair, bifocals in a gold frame."

It sounded like the description of half the grandmothers in the world.

"Well, that helps a lot," said the detective with false encouragement. "No ransom note, I suppose, or anything like that?"

"No, nothing at all."

"And there won't be, I'm sure of that," Dale put in. "This isn't a kidnaping for money; the old lady seemed to be very well off. It's more like — well, the way I figure it out, she grew fond of our kids and that's why she took them."

"We get plenty of cases like that, though it's usually younger women. By the way, we've checked with the manager of the agency you got her from. They don't know a thing about her. She just came in there and signed up one day. They sent her out half a dozen times but she didn't seem to like the people and wouldn't go to any of them again, till they sent her to you. And the only address she gave was what turned out to be that parking lot."

"I'm absolutely positive," Gwen insisted, "that she's gone to her daughter and granddaughter, and taken Gav and Ada with her. She told me she might make a visit to them this fall, and she said something, months ago, about wishing she could take our two along with her. I thought she was just talking. And of course I expected she'd tell us ahead of time when she planned to leave."

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"Neither did you think she'd snatch your children when she went, naturally. Well, folks, don't lose heart. I have kids of my own, and I know how you feel. But we're on the job, and we'll stay on it. We ought to have results very soon. From what you've told me, there isn't a chance she'd do any harm to them. And if she makes any attempt to spirit them out of the country —"

"Oh, the secret journey! I just remembered. Gav said to me only yesterday, 'Mrs. Hinck says some day she'll take us on a secret journey to a strange place.' I just laughed — I never even thought —"

"The only strange place she's going to see is the inside of a jail," the detective said.

But day passed into night again, and still there was no word of progress. They had tried again to eat but the food choked them. Finally they did drop asleep for an hour or two in the late afternoon, until the phone shocked them awake. But it was only the detective, to say that Mrs. Hinck's car had been found parked in the driveway of a vacant house at the other end of the city.

Husband and wife stood together at the front window where Gav and Ada had stood so often watching for Mrs. Hinck. They had stood there for a long time, not even bothering to turn on the lights as night came on. Dale held Gwen close to him, and once in a while she wept quietly.

"Look, darling," he said at last gently. "Are you thinking what I'm thinking?"

Gwen lifted a wet face and nodded dumbly. Her lips trembled.

"I felt you were. Looking out here reminded me of things the kids used to talk about to me while I gardened.

"Gwen, you never studied any foreign languages: I did. *Hinc* means *on this side*, and *illinc* means *from that side*."

Gwen found a shaky voice.

"And the thing you told me, that Gav said — when Mrs. Hinck goes to visit her granddaughter —"

"She doesn't take a train or a bus or a ship or a plane — she just *goes*. Yes, that too."

"Oh, Dale! there were so many hints we never even noticed. That country's America, too, and the language they speak is English."

"We thought that was funny, or just to keep us from snooping. We'd better face it, Gwen. If we're right, the police can't ever get them back to us. And Mrs. Hinck won't need any passport where she's taken them."

She started to sob again. Dale held her tightly, his own face twisted.

" 'I wish she had your little boy and girl to play with'!" he quoted bitterly.

"The toys!" Gwen whispered. "The toys that are simply wonderful, that aren't like any others in the world —"

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It's over three years since we published Bill Brown's The Star Ducks *(F&SF, Fall, 1950); but readers still refer to it affectionately as a perfect example of science fiction on a quiet, intimate, scale. Here is another Brown fantasy of humdrum, homey life — the story of a middle-aged couple, a pregnancy, a goose . . . and a lightning-blackened stump invested with strange powers.*

Spunk Water

by BILL BROWN

MA CAME in the back door shuffling the mud off her outdoor shoes on an old gunny sack. She held the eggs in her apron close to her body. The screendoor was ajar and she pried it open with her elbow and shoved it wider with her shoulder and entered the kitchen. The wash boiler was on the stove making the atmosphere heavy and the windows fogged.

"Hubert," Ma said in a voice loud enough to be heard in the front room, "Hubert, old Gussy's done it again!"

Hubert took his feet down off the fender of the heating stove and he peered around into the kitchen.

"Solid or just the shell?"

Ma was putting the eggs gently into a crockery bowl on the kitchen table. The last egg was a large, yellow goose egg and Ma held it up to the window.

"Can't see through it. 'Tain't heavy enough to be pure gold, though."

Hubert put his feet back on the fender.

"If ole Gussy can make a shell outen gold, she orter be able to make a whole damn egg! Other geese have did it."

Ma sharpened her voice into a scold. "Pa! Ain't no call for you to swear around this house. If you can't use clean, decent language, you go out to the barn and swear." Ma polished the golden egg with a dishtowel. "Anyhow," she said, "maybe other geese have did it but Gussy's looking pretty peaked and I think the strain's too much for her."

"Posh," Hubert said. "That's a female goose's natural function and it don't put no strain on 'em at all."

"Well, Hubert Wilkens, somethin's bothering her. 'Tain't natural for a goose to sleep all day. Besides, she ain't teched her dinner."

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Hubert pried himself out of his chair with his hands on the arms and nudged his rubbers from under the stove with his foot.

"You men jest never know what a woman has to endure," Ma said and there was the beginning of the old whine in her voice, the whine she developed four months ago when she discovered she was going to have a baby — another baby after her first children had grown up and gone away to have children of their own.

"You can say layin' eggs and havin' babies is a natural function but that's a woman's sacrifice," Ma said. "It's the Hand o' God on 'em. Bein' a man, you'll never know."

Hubert was slipping out of the room with his rubbers in his hand. Ma's voice was still whining on about the endurance of women when Hubert quietly closed the back door and slipped the rubbers on before he stepped out into the muddy back yard.

Hubert found Gussy asleep under a gooseberry bush, her head under her wing, issuing soft, restless sounds.

"Well, Gussy," Hubert said, "you must of really went on a bender to still be sleepin' it off."

Gussy's soft sounds stopped and she shivered a little.

"Here Gussy," he said, "here's a aspirin." He pulled the goose's head gently from under her wing and Gussy opened her eyes long enough to scoop up the white pill in his hand. Then her head went back under her wing as though pulled by a rubber band.

Hubert crouched down by Gussy and stroked her back. "Old girl, when you get a snifter of this new stuff like as not you'll lay eggs twenty-four carat and solid all through." He clicked his tongue in anticipation. "Got raisins in it this time, Gussy, and twice as powerful!"

Gussy moved a little but kept her head under her wing.

Hubert crossed the creek on three widely separated stones placed just far enough apart to be beyond Ma's stretch and he slopped up the trail to last summer's wood lot.

Behind a huckleberry bush was a black stump that had been blasted by lightning fire and burned into the shape of a monstrous leaning three-legged cauldron. It was burned out between the three twisted roots to make a cavern and the lightning fire had burned out the top to make a charred crater for spunk water alive with mosquito wigglers.

Hubert lifted away the slab of bark that concealed the cavern and inside was a small barrel and an ancient copper teakettle with two feet of coiled copper tubing soldered into the spout. There was a rusty camp stove and a broken crockery dish.

Hubert reached behind the barrel and drew out a stone jug. He sloshed it

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around and found it was still almost half full. He lifted the jug and took a strong pull, shutting his eyes against the shock. He muttered "smooooooth" under his breath and shuddered.

Hubert put the jug back and he picked up the crockery dish. He scooped it up full of sour mash and lifted it to his nose and sniffed. The fumes almost choked him. He sniffed again, and then he carried the dish around to the upper side of the stump. He stirred the spunk water with his hand to make the wigglers go to the bottom and he sank the dish carefully until half a cup of water flowed in over the sides. He stirred the mash with a twig and poked at the bloated raisins that came to the top. Whether it was the liquor or the spunk water that did the trick, Hubert didn't know, but he had experimented with both and it was only in combination that it seemed to work. And Hubert was mighty careful not to get spunk water in his own jug because . . . well . . . no use taking chances.

Crossing the creek on the stones, Hubert held the dish at arm's length and before he offered it to Gussy, he gave a cautious glance toward the house.

"Here girl, here's a nip of the hair of the dog that bit you."

Gussy shivered a little and pulled her head from under her wing. Hubert took a little mash on his finger and held it up to Gussy's beak. She nibbled at it and swallowed. She blinked twice in a glassy-eyed way and plunged her beak into the dish, scooping up the bubbly mess, raisins and all. The mash was half gone before Gussy had to pause to hiccup.

The hiccup was followed by the soft sound of shoes mashing the wet earth. Hubert turned his head slowly until he could see the shoes, Ma's old black outdoor shoes, and the hem of the gray coat that came down almost to the shoes.

"Hubert!" Ma said, her voice rising on the last syllable.

Hubert tried to make his voice sound off-hand. "Jest givin' Gussy her dinner."

Ma bent over and snatched up the broken dish still half full of sour mash and raisins. She thrust her nose almost into the mash and drew a deep breath and reared back, coughing.

"Hubert! What's in this?"

Hubert rubbed the mud off one rubber against the other while the goose thrust her neck up towards the dish high over her head.

"Nothin' but chicken feed, Ma. And maybe a few mouldy raisins."

"Chicken feed! Pa, you been stealing my chicken feed again to make sour mash. And if that ain't bad enough, just lookit what you done to poor old Gussy!"

Gussy was up and walking in circles but her webbed feet were too big for each other. When one foot would step on the other, Gussy would pitch

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over. She got up again and spread her wings for balance and promptly sat down backwards.

Hubert started to laugh but choked it off when he saw Ma's glare. Ma pitched the dish and the mash into the creek. "How could anybody — even a man — be so cruel to a poor dumb beast?" she demanded and marched off toward the house, her old coat flapping around her legs.

Gussy came back to Hubert and tried to climb into his lap but Hubert pushed her away. "Nope, Gussy, 'tain't no time to be affectionate. You and me is in trouble."

Hubert started for the house and stopped at the back door to wipe his feet on the gunny sack. He looked back to see Gussy waddling toward the old Plymouth Rock rooster, her neck stuck forward aggressively. The rooster took one look and started for the safety of the henhouse with a squawk. Hubert shook his head and went into the house.

Ma was standing by the sink staring stonily out the window. She had just seen the ungallant retreat of the rooster.

Hubert tried to put his arm around her but she shook him off.

"Take your drunken hands off me!"

"But I ain't drunk, Ma."

"You got the soul of a drunkard, you beast — you degrader of womankind!"

"Shucks, Ma, Gussy ain't exactly a woman."

"She is too a woman. Ain't a man alive that's got the faintest spark of respect for womankind. Takin' a poor innocent goose and makin' a drunkard out of her!" Ma stood stiff as an icicle and stared out of the window.

Hubert rubbed his stubbly chin and tried another approach.

"But it all happened as sort of an accident, Ma. I just had this little dab of sour mash, Ma. . . . It just sort of went sour when I wasn't lookin' and Gussy found it and ate it all up and a couple days later here you come in with a gold egg."

Ma turned on Hubert with her eyes blazing.

"Well, it wasn't no sour mash done it!"

"Yes 'twas. Cause ever since I been keepin' her on sour mash and she keeps layin' gold eggs."

"That's a man for you . . . sacrifice a goose's morals just for gold!"

"But Ma, it's you likes them gold eggs. Jamieson down to the store won't even give egg prices for 'em because he said they won't candle on account of the shell."

"Hubert! You didn't try to sell *my* gold eggs!"

"Well now, Ma, I figgered them eggs ought to be worth maybe a dollar, dollar and a half apiece and I thought maybe our fortune was made."

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Ma turned back to stare out of the window. "Only thing I ever get around here that's pretty and you want to sell it. Only gold things I ever had in my life."

Pa got up and kicked off his rubbers and let them fall behind the kitchen stove.

"Well, they won't be no more gold eggs, so no use takin' on about it."

"There better not be," Ma said, "if it's that devil's brew that makes 'em."

On second thought, Pa picked up his rubbers and headed for the woodlot for another pull on the jug.

That night Ma ate her supper off the stove and let Hubert do the same. In the night Hubert woke up and saw Ma with a lamp on the book case arranging her four gold eggs in a little nest in front of the clock. In the morning Ma left hot oatmeal on the stove for Hubert and was out tending the chickens when Hubert got up.

Later, when she came in with her apron full of eggs, she picked out a gold one and held it up obviously for Hubert to see, pretending to look through it.

"Sour mash . . . humph!" she said.

"Sure sour mash," Hubert said. "That's from yesterday's mash. There won't be no more."

And there weren't any more. For two days Gussy moped around refusing the sweet mash Ma tried to feed her and she didn't lay at all. On the third day Ma found a white egg in the nest. She brought it in grim-faced and put it in the bowl with the other eggs without a word.

That night again Ma was up rearranging the five gold eggs on the dining table and the next day she punched holes in the shells and blew them so they wouldn't spoil. And every hour she would go out and look in the nest and pet Gussy but there were no more eggs, gold or white.

Gradually Gussy returned to the way of all normal geese. She ate a little of her feed and she explored under damp leaves with her bill for bugs and she paddled in the still parts of the creek. But she slept little in the daytime and although the old rooster would still run in terror when he saw her, she showed no more interest in him than she would in a block of stove wood. Hubert watched her and shook his head sadly.

Ma spent more time with her gold eggs, dusting them twice a day, arranging them first on top of the book shelf filled with chipped tea cups and petrified wood, and then on the table, and with the bowl of waxed fruit. One day when Hubert came in from the barn, Ma was painting six hen's eggs with gilt paint but when she was done she sighed with disappointment and put them all into a chocolate layer cake.

Another day when Hubert came in the kitchen from outside his nose

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quivered a little like a rabbit's. He sniffed again and when he came closer to the kitchen stove the smell was stronger. Behind the stove was the old sauerkraut crock and Hubert bent over and lifted the lid. The crock was half full of bubbling mash.

Ma was leaning against the book case studying her gold eggs.

"Ma," Hubert said, "you got some chicken feed in here a-spoiling."

Ma came in and sniffed behind the stove. She opened her eyes wide with surprise. "Well, what do you know, it's sour as swill."

"Sure does smell powerful," Hubert said.

Ma wiped her hands on her apron. "Don't know how it ever happened to sour. I'll throw it out tomorrow."

"Be sure you don't throw it where Gussy'll get it or you'll have some more gold eggs."

"Pa, I know what you're a-thinking. I know you're a-thinking I made that just apurpose to feed Gussy!"

"You're all mixed up, Ma. Now what do you really want, a sober Gussy or more gold eggs?"

Ma suddenly turned to Hubert and put her apron over her face.

"Oh, I'm a wicked, sinful woman, Pa. I'm the evilest wickedest woman in the world!" She sobbed into her apron. Pa waited.

"I just love them gold eggs so much and I keep wishin' Gussy'd lay some more and then I let that mash get sour and I was just about to . . . to . . . contribute to the delinquency of a poor innocent goose.

"I just can't sleep at night thinking about those eggs," Ma wailed. "And then I think about poor drunk Gussy trippin' over her own feet . . . and I think about her chasing after that old rooster. And I know I'll go on thinkin' about them eggs and wantin' more so much I can't stand it."

"Now Ma," Hubert said. "You just stop that cryin'. Ain't no women folk in this family going to be all mixed up like that when they're in a family way!" Hubert took his hat off the peg by the door and slapped it on his head. "There's only one thing to do and I aim to do it!" He slammed the door behind him and stopped by the woodpile for the ax.

Hubert did a good job on Gussy out behind the henhouse. He stuffed all the feathers into an old feed bag so they wouldn't blow around and start Ma crying again every time she saw them. He dug a hole with the ax and buried Gussy's head and he took the insides up the creek and laid them on a rock so the coons would get them.

When Hubert brought the body in Ma cried a while and then she dried her eyes and singed Gussy over a burning newspaper on top of the stove. The smell of singed fowl went all through the house, making the death definite and final and then it wasn't so bad. Ma stuffed the goose with dry bread

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dressing and tied her wings over her breast in a respectful way. She cried a little again when she filled the stove with dry oak for a hot fire.

Hubert was washed and shaved for dinner and he wore a clean blue shirt and his hair was combed. Gussy lay in the platter and Ma had taken the wire of an old Christmas wreath and she had woven it with flowers and put it around the platter. She'd picked the two calla lilies by the front steps and she lay the lilies beside the body.

When Hubert came in and saw the table he stood still for a minute.

"Well, Ma," he said after a while, "Gussy's finally taken her fit and respectful place in this family."

Ma adjusted one of the lilies a little and then she went into the living room and came back with the five gold eggshells and laid them carefully among the flowers on the wreath. She stood back admiringly.

"You know, Pa, I guess Gussy really did enjoy layin' those gold eggs. I think she was right proud of 'em."

"Sure, Ma, sure Gussy was proud of 'em. And she'd be proud if she could see her and the eggs now."

Ma wiped her cheek with her apron. "But it's going to take a lot of courage, Pa, to eat Gussy." She took a little handkerchief out of her apron pocket and blew her nose. "You don't suppose you got a little something — just a little something maybe to give me courage?"

Hubert reached for his hat on the peg. "Sure, Ma, I got something that'll give you real courage. Just a little nip for ole Gussy's sake." He reached a glass down from the cupboard and closed the door behind him. He went off toward the woodlot where the old stump had been blasted by lightning fire into the shape of a leaning three-legged cauldron and the top was burned out to make a crater for spunk water.

Hubert took a strong pull on the jug and he poured out two fingers in the glass for Ma. He held it up and looked at the yellow liquor. "Courage," he thought. "She's going to need a lot of courage," and he poured in another finger and he held up the glass again and watched the light filter through the liquor. "Women sure likes funny things when they's having babies. Like gold eggs." He stared at the liquor, fascinated. "Ma sure likes gold things."

Then, almost as though the light coming through the liquor had hypnotized him, Hubert walked around the stump to where he could lean over the top and see the spunk water. He reached in with his hand and stirred around and around until all the mosquito wigglers went to the bottom.

"Eggs and babies is just about the same thing," he thought. "Not much difference." He sank the glass slowly to the rim and watched a trickle of spunk water flow in.

"Ma sure would like a gold one," he said, just under his breath.

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There has been some argument as to whether the title story and other items in Shirley Jackson's splendid collection THE LOTTERY (*Farrar, Straus, 1949*) *can be strictly classed as fantasy fiction; they are intensely disquieting stories of an uncertain and terrifying world . . . but is this anything other than a realistic depiction of the world we live in? There can, however, be no question as to classifying Miss Jackson's first story for F&SF — a pure science-fantasy of time travel, and as tantalizingly provocative a fragment as we've seen in years.*

Bulletin

by SHIRLEY JACKSON

(ED. NOTE: The time travel machine sent out recently by this university has returned, unfortunately without Professor Browning. Happily for the University Space Department, however, Professor Browning's briefcase, set just inside the time travel element, returned, containing the following papers which bear ample evidence of the value to scientific investigation of sending Professor Browning on this much-discussed trip into the Twenty-Second Century. It is assumed by members of the Space Department that these following papers were to serve as the basis for notes for the expected lecture by Professor Browning, which will now, of course, be indefinitely postponed.)

(*From a newspaper, torn, heading reading only ". . . ld-Tribune, May 8, 2123"*):

. . . indifference in high quarters which has led so inevitably to this distressing result. Not only those directly affected — and they are many — but, indeed, thoughtful and reasonable persons everywhere, must view with extreme alarm an act which has given opportunism an advantage over intelligent planning. It is greatly to be regretted that, among those in power who were in a position to take action, none except the unpopular Secretary chose to do so, and his opposition was, as so frequently it must be, disregarded. In any case, let us unite in hope that the possible consequences will not take place, and prepare to guard ourselves with the utmost vigilance against a recurrence of such incidents.

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(*From what appears to be a private correspondence:*)

June 4

Dear Mom and Dad,
I am haveing a fine time at camp. I went swiming and dived, but Charley didnt. Send me a cake and some cokies and candy.

Your loveing son,
Jerry

(*A mimeographed sheet*):

American History 102
Mid-Term Examination
April 21, 2123

1. Identify twelve (12) of the following:

Nathan Hale	Grover Cleveland
Huey Long	Woodrow Wilson I
Carrie Chapman Catt	Joyce Kilmer
Merry Oldsmobile	Edna Wallace Hopper
Cotton Mather	Chief Sitting Bull
Robert Nathan	Old Ironsides
George Washingham	John Philip Sousa
Oveta Culp Hobby	Sergeant Cuff
Sinclair (Joe) Louis	R. H. Macy
Alexander Hamilton	

2. The historian Roosevelt-san has observed that "Twentieth-century man had both intelligence and instinct; he chose, unfortunately, to rely upon intelligence." Discuss.

3. Some of the following statements are true, some are false. Mark them T and F accordingly:

Currency was originally used as a medium of exchange.

The aboriginal Americans lived above-ground and drank water.

The first American settlers rebelled against the rule of Churchill III and set up their own government because of the price of tea.

Throat-scratch, the disease which swept through

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twentieth-century life, was introduced to this country by Sir Walter Raleigh.

The hero Jackie Robinson is chiefly known for his voyage to obtain the golden fleece.

Working was the principal occupation of twentieth-century humanity.

The first king in American, George Washingham, refused the crown three times.

The cat was at one time tame, and used in domestic service.

4. Describe in your own words the probable daily life of an American resident in 1950, using what you have learned of his eating, entertainment, and mating habits.

5. In what sense did ancient Americans contribute to our world today? Can we learn anything of value by studying them?

(*A narrow card, indentifiably from a machine*):

YOUR WEIGHT AND FORTUNE!

Your weight is **186**

Your fortune for today: Expect permanent relief in minor domestic problems, but avoid too-hasty plans for the future. Try not to dwell on the past. You are determined, clear-sighted, firm: use these qualities. Remember that you can be led but not driven.

(ED. NOTE: This last item seems of great significance. It is well known that Professor Browning's weight when he left the University in the time travel element was better than 200 pounds. The evident loss of weight shown indicates clearly the changes incident to time travel, and points, perhaps, to some of its perils; there is possibly a hint here of an entirely different system of weights and measures than that currently in use. We anticipate that several learned and informed papers on this subject are already in preparation.)

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If the literature of today is harsh and violent, surely we can expect even more emphasis on such qualities in the literature of the future, and the day will come when the descendants of I, THE JURY *and* THE MARTIAN CHRONICLES *represent not two branches of art, but one. This respectable family magazine has hitherto held itself aloof from excesses of sex and sadism; but we must face future realities, as in this explosive (and implosive) tale of a Private Orb, a Martian, a Venusian . . . and the Chocolate Maltese Falcon — the first of many F&SF stories by one of the most rapidly rising younger authors of science-fantasy.*

The Last Caper

by CHARLES BEAUMONT

"So YOU'RE Mike Mallet," I said, feeding him some knuckles. He went down — fast — and began to whimper. When he came back up I got my knee under his chin and teeth flew out like the popcorn they used to pop on those drowsy October porches when I was a kid and Mom and Dad used to say "Ah! Ah!" and we'd drink the lemonade and eat the popcorn and breathe the Illinois air which was like old wine.

"Spill it, Mallet," I snarled, but I guess he thought I meant blood. It wasn't pretty. What is?

I tapped him on the forehead with the chromalloy butt of my blaster, just for kicks, and started through his pockets.

There wasn't much. A ray pistol disguised as a ball point pen, a shiv, a sap, a set of knuckles, a paralyzer, a Monopoly score card, eight candy bars, a bottle of Bromo-Seltzer, a picture of an old dame with a funny look (with *For Mikey, with love, Mommy* scrawled suspiciously underneath in crayon), a paint brush, a ticket to Mars (out-dated), a copy of *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, a can of Sterno and a card marked: HONORARY MEMBER —EAST ORANGE CHAPTER LADIES LEAGUE FOR PRESERVATION OF THE AMERICAN BEAUTY ROSE.

And that was all!

If he had it, if Mallet really did have what I was after — the Chocolate Maltese Falcon — it wasn't on him. I toed at his face and jammed the candy

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bars into my mouth: they tasted real fine, mostly because I'd had nothing in my stomach except straight rye for over seventeen days. The rest of the junk I tossed out the window.

"Come on, friend," I said, but he just lay there bleeding. It made me a little mad, and I'm kind of ugly when I get mad. I went through the door into his outer office. His secretary was there.

"Next time *open* the door before you come through it, big boy," she spat.

I didn't answer. My eyes were riveted to her body. She was wearing a slinky gold gown that looked like it had been painted on and she was lying on a big leather couch, writhing. I still felt pretty mean, so I moved in — fast.

I've got to admit I was plenty surprised when I found out that the gown really *was* painted on; but it made things easier.

"Get much hot weather around here?" I snapped, my eyes traveling up and down her body like ball-bearings over a washboard.

"Sometimes yes," she said evasively, "sometimes no. It comes and it goes."

"Oh yeah?" She was all right: a little wildcat, and I like wildcats just fine. She threw a vicious kick at my groin but I dodged and grabbed her leg. Then I grabbed her other leg. Then I grabbed her other leg. Oh, she was different, all right. But good!

After I finished with her I jammed her into the typewriter cabinet and let the door slam shut. Dames!

I was feeling a lot better by now, though. Kind of like spring in the air and the first time you carried the books home for that freckle-faced girl next door and goodbye and hello and the dead years of your childhood. I knew I could find that Chocolate Maltese Falcon now no matter how cleverly Mallet had hidden it.

I stormed back into his office. He was coming to, getting to his knees. This time I used a poker on his head — it'll make somebody a good scythe some day. The poker, that is.

I went to work, thinking it's got to be here, it's *got* to be here! I kicked over the book case, took an ax to the desk, piled the chairs into the fireplace, pushed the safe out the window, cut the carpet into Band-Aides, ripped out the light fixtures, flooded the restroom and wrote a couple things on the walls with some charcoal. Mallet was starting to groan a little so I dropped the bathtub on him: he stopped groaning.

Still no Chocolate Maltese Falcon!

The place was getting pretty untidy by now. I decided I'd better ease up or somebody'd figure there'd been trouble.

Just then a movement caught my eye. I jerked around. A tall blonde

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was walking by the window. I knew she was tall — Mallet's office was on the ninth floor. She looked all February, silos in the rain, clear lakes full of trout. I started after her and was halfway out when there was a knock at the door.

Rat-tat! Rat-tat!

I jumped to answer it but my foot skidded on some blood and I went down for the ten count, hitting my head on one of the Brancusi statuettes Mallet kept around for laughs. Right away an inky black pool came at me: it splashed over my brain and pretty soon it was like laying on your back high on a hill somewheres on a black night where the stars are coruscating and dancing their cosmic rigadoon. Before I blacked out completely, though, I felt the butt of a blaster hit the side of my face. Then it was curtains. . . .

The voice cut through the brain-fog like a knife going through butter. There was a million firecrackers going off inside my head. Pow!

Pow! Pow!

"You Gunther Awl?" a voice said.

I spit out a couple teeth. "Yeah," I choked, "I'm Gunther Awl." It was a lie. I wasn't Gunther Awl at all. But I figured I'd better play it safe.

"C'mon, snap out of it," the voice ordered. I got up, slow-like, and staggered to a chair.

"All right," the voice said, "let's have it."

I focused my eyes. It was a fat guy, with curly hair and jowls and a tattoo of Botticelli's *Venus on the Half Shell* on his forehead. A fink. A patsy.

"Anything particular in mind, badman?" I drawled. The gun butt came down again with savage force and I found myself spiraling into that inky black pool again. Only this time it was like being inside a kaleidoscope and the kaleidoscope is turning like the Giant Barrel over at Coney and you're trying to stand up but the Barrel keeps turning too fast and you keep falling down and every time you fall you slide a little closer to the sparkling fragments of color at the top of the kaleidoscope and the bright white light filters through like it's a big pool with hundreds of jeweled fishes with bright white teeth swimming around in it. Then suddenly you're at the top . . . and you come to again.

"Where's the Falcon, Awl?" the fat man said. "And don't get funny this time."

"No spikka da Heenglish," I faked, but it wasn't any good — I could see that. It didn't stop him for more than two minutes, three at the outside.

He hawked convulsively and I thought he was going to heave, then I saw that he was laughing. What at? I wondered. He stopped laughing before I could dope it out.

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"Don't push it, rocket-jockey," he said. I could tell he wasn't joking. This monkey was playing for keeps.

"Look," I said, "you got the wrong boy. I ain't Gunther Awl. My name's Bartholomew Cornblossom."

"Yeah," he said, grinning, "I know." He shifted the blaster to his left hand and let me have a backsided right across the puss.

When his hand came off and dropped to the floor, I knew *I* was in for some surprises myself.

He started to change form — fast — and in less time than it takes to skin a jackrabbit, like the hick says, I was staring at a lousy Venusian. I hated him right away because I didn't understand him and I always hate what I don't understand. Sometimes I hate what I *do* understand.

I had to stall. "What's your angle, cousin?" I asked. "What good's the Chocolate Maltese Falcon to a Venusian?"

There was that laugh again, coming from one of his ears. I did a quick mental flashback as that green blob of jelly came at me.

How had it all started . . .

I'd been sitting in my office that day playing euchre with 1742-A, my secretary. She was beating me — bad — and that made me plenty sore, because I don't dig getting beat; not by a robot, anyway. 1742-A was a robot. Who can afford real secretaries at fifty credits a caper? Besides, business had kind of slacked off.

Well, I was reaching over to turn her off, when this redhead walks in like she owned the place, which she didn't: I rented from a Mrs. Murfreesboro over in Jersey — a bigmouth dame that liked me okay.

"Hello, Bart," the redhead said. She had on a fur coat. It was dead — murdered. I told her to sit down and she said thanks I will and sat down. So far it figured.

She got out a flask from her purse and gave it to me before I could say boo. I shot her a look and let the rye trickle down my craw. It was good rye, fine rye.

"What's the caper?" I snapped.

Then she told me about this thing, the Chocolate Maltese Falcon. She said it was a family heirloom that her old man left to her when he kicked off. She said not only was it worth plenty scratch on the open market, but it had great sentimental value to boot. She said she hired Mike Mallet as a guard, and that's when the trouble started. Next morning: no Mallet, no Falcon.

My job: Find Mallet, get the Falcon, bring it back.

"I suppose," she said, pulling out some vitamin capsules, "that you're in

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business for your health." She did big things with her eyes. I was impressed.

"No," I told her, "I ain't in business for my health."

She pouted a little. "All right," she said then, "how'd you like a nice new C-note, Handsome?"

"I'd like it fine, ma'am," I said.

"And if you're successful," she cooed, "maybe — who knows? — maybe there'll be a little bonus. . . ."

"You mean?" I pulled her onto my lap and grabbed some lip. It was plenty great. It made me think of oceans crashing against lonely rocks and cotton candy and the carnival where the man in the bright vest says "Hurry! Hurry!"

Then she scrammed. Without leaving a deposit.

"Are you going to turn over the Falcon peacefully?" the green snake guy was saying, "or must we resort to measures best described as strong?"

I laughed in his faces. The butt flashed out and I was sinking, sinking into that old inky black pool. . . .

When I woke up, my arms were tied. My legs were tied. I was sitting in a straight-back chair. It wouldn't have been so bad, maybe — except I was hanging upside down.

"We shall see now how bravely the Earthling struts!" The Venusian slithered over toward the radio. I wondered: What's his pitch? How come he's so interested in a family heirloom?

"You'll never get nothing out of me," I snarled.

The radio hummed into life.

"What the —" I began, lamely.

The Venusian crammed a gag into my mouth. "Listen!" he said.

I listened. . . .

"Monday . . . Monday . . . *Monday!*"

"No, David, please — don't touch me. I came to see you tonight to say . . . goodbye."

"*Goodbye?!*"

"Yes! For a few blind, crazy — wonderful — hours, you made me forget that I'm over thirty-five, a married woman and mother of six. But now —"

"Now?"

"— Lord Henri is back. He's — brought the children. I — oh David! Don't touch me! Hold me close!

"Monday!"

"David!"

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Then I got it. Leave it to a stinking wet-belly Venusian to think up the *real* tortures. A soap opera!

I listened to the electric organ's moo. Maybe I shouldn't admit it, but I can't stand soap operas. Oh, I know, *One Man's Cosmos* is mainly what's kept the planets from all-out war, but . . . well, they give me a pain in the gut.

I tried to shut my ears, but it was no dice. . . .

". . . Will Monday be able to make David understand? *How* can she explain to him that she remains loyal to her husband, Lord Henri Winthrop, *not* because she loves him but because he has come back from the Erosian uprising a hopeless paralytic? And what of David? How can he tell Monday that her husband is really dead — murdered — and that his, Lord Henri's, neurotic twin brother, Hugo Winthrop, is playing the part of the invalid husband? How can David let her know that the portals to their happiness lie open — when Hugo threatens to expose David's lurid past as a privateer and *tsi-tso* frond smuggler for the Martians? . . . and the children! Will the operation actually restore little Tuesday's eyesight? Will Wednesday be able to exorcise the Uranian bandit who has inhabited her body? Will Friday regain her memory in time to stop Nick Branzetti's evil plan? . . . Tune in tomorrow at this time to see what Fate has in store for — OUR GAL MONDAY: *The Real Life Story that Asks the Question: Can a Girl rom a Little Lunar Rocketport Find Happiness with Jupiter's Richest, Most Handsome Queek?* . . . And now, a word from —"

"Would you care to tell me the location of the Falcon *now*, Mr. Cornblossom?" asked the Venusian, removing the gag.

"I don't know where it is," I snapped. "I don't know. I don't know!"

"Very well . . ."

He turned the radio higher. And I thought: My God — it might have been television. . . .

". . . your dishes and thurpets sparkling bright, dazzling white, with the new washday miracle that requires no rinsing, in fact, requires no water: STAR-FLAKES! . . . Just open the cage, let out a few flakes, turn them loose on those greasy pots and torgums and — just watch 'em eat up that grime! PRESTO! The job is finished. Then all you have to do is drop the dead flakes into a handy container and bury them somewhere. Remember! STAR-FLAKES are 99.44 per cent ALIVE! . . ."

"Where is the Falcon?"

"I don't know! I don't know!"

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". . . and now stay tuned for the program that follows: The best loved, most respected program in the world: ONE MAN'S COSMOS: *The Story of Just Plain Gratch, the Friendly Tendril-Tender of Betelgeuseville* —"

"All right, you damned fiend!" I screamed. "All right! I'll tell you!"

"Ah." The Venusian turned the program off just as my mind was beginning to go. He let me down.

"Before I give it to you," I said, "would you mind letting me know why you're so interested? After all, even if the statue's worth money, you don't need —"

"Statue!" The snake guy chortled and choked. "Statue!" I thought he'd break up; then he sobered — fast. "The bird with the whimsical cognomen," he hissed, "happens to contain enough D-plus-4-over-X grains to blow up a planet!"

Well, that was a kick in the pants, all right.

The government had been going ape trying to figure out who'd stolen the secret D-plus-4-over-X grains. Now I had the picture. Redhead. My beautiful employer. A lousy spy. She'd lifted the bomb from the government and then somebody'd lifted it from her.

Real sweet. Where did it leave me, Bart Cornblossom, Private Orb? At the short end of the stick, that's where.

"The planet I refer to," the Venusian was saying, "is, needless to remark, your own."

"Not," somebody said, "if I can help it!" It was Mike Mallet — groggy, but still plenty tough. He got a half-nelson around the Venusian, grabbed the blaster and in a second Mr. Venus-man was out of the story.

"Hiya, Bart —" Mallet said, then he seemed to remember. "You son of a —"

"Drop the gun, Mallet," a voice said. Mallet whirled around in time to catch three good blasts in the belly. I could smell it clear across the room.

"Hello, Baby," I snarled.

"Hello, Bart," she said. "Now be a good boy and play ball. I know you've got the Falcon."

"Come and get it."

She ripped off her clothes and sat in my lap. I started to think of July when I saw that she was wavering, changing. She wasn't no redhead — she was a Martian!

"Mallet was going to turn the Falcon back over to your government," she said, nibbling at my schnoz. "I had to do it. You can see that, can't you?"

"Sure," I said. "I can see that."

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"But you're not like that, Bart. You're smart — I can tell. Look —" She twiddled her antennae like a couple castanets. "— you've always made a mess out of me inside. Ever since that first kiss. Miscegenation be damned, that kiss was for real! So listen — with the money my government'll pay me for the D-plus-4-over-X grains, we could really live it up."

"Sure, baby," I said, "But I ain't going nowheres all tied up in this chair."

She planted one on my kisser and I felt all May and golden fields of ripe wheat and barefoot in soft river mud. She undid the ropes.

"We've got to hurry, though," she whispered. "The grains explode — or, I should say, implode — every 36 hours: we have just barely enough time to ship them away. But first — oh darling, squirrel, my own Bart — we're going to be so very happy. . . ."

She was beautiful, green hair or no green hair, and I held her body — close — and felt her breathing and thought about her next to me at night and the dough and —

I hated it. It made me sick, deep down where it hurts.

"Darling —"

I let her have it in the gut. She sprawled. I grabbed the blaster and pretty soon there was some jam on the floor instead of a dame.

"I'm sorry, baby," I whispered to the sticky heap, "really sorry . . ."

I don't know — maybe I cried, maybe I laughed. I only know I went crazy mad for a few seconds.

Then I straightened up and thought: so, it's all over. End of the caper. Back to the office and a few straight shots and a couple lousy credits.

But wait. Good gravy, I thought: The Falcon! If she was telling the truth and those D-plus-4-over-X grains really were inside — and getting ready to explode, I mean implode . . .

I could hear them coming. Lots of them. I ran to the window — big ones, armed, none of them smiling. Venusians, Martians, Jovians —

There was a wild chuckling then. "Heh heh heh!" I took the lunky out of my mug and snapped it away and went through the door.

The chuckling was coming from the typewriter cabinet. I opened it. I should've known better than to be nice to any chick with three legs. They're poison with two — but with three! "What's the gag?" I snarled.

She told me. I couldn't believe it — I made her go through it four times. Then fear started to tear up my stomach muscles.

Mallet had had the Chocolate Maltese Falcon, all right. But he'd been smart. Yeah, smart.

He'd had it melted down into candy bars!

And I'd been hungry, so —

It wasn't easy to take. All the bums in the Galaxy were after the Chocolate

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Maltese Falcon. Which meant that all the bums in the Galaxy were after me. Because —

Now I *was* the Chocolate Maltese Falcon!

Sweat Niagaraed down my face. The D-plus-4-over-X grains had been missing for — how long? No, no, I thought. Jeez!

I belted the nutty dame a good one on the smeller and listened to her yell until it got boring. Then the door burst open. The big Jovian started to ankle over, hate in his five little pig eyes.

I squeezed the trigger and turned the Jovian into a blood pudding like they used to serve in those English places with names like Seven Oaks and Ukridge.

Then the Venusians came in and I figured the better part of valor was to blow. A couple squeezes of the trigger and I blew.

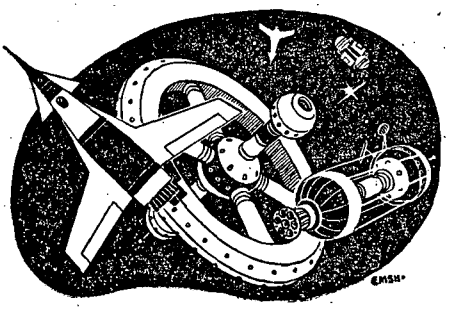
I got behind Mallet's desk and loosened my tie and pushed my hat back on my head, thinking, this is it, Bart boy, this is it.

They were getting ready. That door would fly open in a second —

All of a sudden I felt something happening inside my gut, a rumbling like you get after a slug of rye. It started to ache — bad — and the second the scum of the universe spilled in, it came up.

Fast.

And then I wasn't Bart Cornblossom any more. I was Christmas and the smell of afternoon turkey and playgrounds where you fall down and scab up your knees and have to run home to Mom and Dad and hello how are you and a piece of the sky just fell Chicken Little and now it's all falling falling and how long is eternity Gramp? and Gramp saying it's a right smart piece o' time boy and don't cry son because worse things than blowing up can happen to a man lots worse things and you're floating floating out there with the whole world for a teeter-totter for ever and ever and ever. . . .



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In this highly individual story of interplanetary exploration, Mr. Dee has taken his title from Daniel Defoe, and with it Defoe's absorbing accumulation of minute details and his ability to impart a sense of absolute conviction. But completely Dee's own is the extraordinary pattern revealed when the details have been accumulated, a pattern to demonstrate that there must be meaning in the universe . . . and that there may be more than one meaning in a title.

Man Friday

by ROGER DEE

August Twelfth, 1971
First Morning on Mars

Amazingly, there was a propitiary offering outside my sleeping bubble when I awoke this morning.

I found the fruit — a handful of tiny, pale-coral berries — completely unfamiliar, but the liquid that accompanied it was easily identified. It was water, perhaps a cupful of it neatly twisted into a transparent membrane of some sort and more precious here than any nectar, collected drop by drop from God alone knows what difficult source.

Another in my position might be touched by my nocturnal admirer's earnestness, but his attentions leave me neither intrigued nor pleased. To have a planet all to myself — even one so spectacularly bleak and dead — is a singularly satisfying situation, and even so diffident an intrusion as this threatens to destroy my privacy and to distract me from my project.

Ironically enough, at the outset of this improbable undertaking I derived a certain wry amusement from thinking of myself as a sort of latter-day Crusoe, marooned (albeit willingly, in the interests of science and of my own introverted bent for soul-searching) not in the transient isolation of a desert island but in the utter inaccessibility of a desert world. My congenital dislike for companionship, I thought then, must spare me from sharing Robinson's cross; he was essentially a gregarious sort, yearning so desperately for the social support of numbers that he was ready to seize upon the appearance of any fawning savage to realize it, while I am a

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recluse by choice. I should not only have resented the appearance of his man Friday, but should have found any such unequal relationship profoundly distasteful.

That history repeats itself is a threadbare banality. That even fictional history may do so, and across an interplanetary gulf, is a signally disturbing discovery.

I share none of Crusoe's gregarious cravings, yet from all indications I shall soon have company. But what shall I do with a man Friday? How shall I adapt my behavior (or my lack of it, from the conventional view) to another presence here, especially to one which may not only be outside my experience but beyond my comprehension?

Crusoe's man Friday was a native. So, obviously, is mine. But what is a *Martian* native like?

Such speculation degenerates at once into pointless guesswork that tends to disturb rather than to reassure; it will profit me instead, I think, though I had not intended to waste valuable time in the keeping of a detailed journal, to put down in the order of their occurrence the events leading up to my present anomalous situation. I choose chronological precedence partly because I despise the popular journalistic urgency which demands that the gist of a story be served up before its introduction, and partly because form has always seemed more important to me than content: as the glaze of a piece of Italian *majolica* is more notable than the coarse clay body of the pot itself, for example, or as the virtue of a Mozart quartet outstrips the personal merit of its composer.

But any recapitulation made in the interests of clarity should begin at the beginning. So shall mine.

My flight in the *Medea* — so named in ironic symbolism by Steven Sobieski, who designed her — consumed some 33 days, none of which I found more interesting or depressing than any other. I spent the entire time, except for necessary interruptions to attend to bodily wants, in my hammock, where I occupied myself alternately with analyzing the seventeen variations of Joseph Sczhau's revolutionary attack at chess and with trying to establish a practical balance between the undeniable logic and the monumental nonsense of Hegel's metaphysics.

The trip was soon over; 33 days is a ridiculously short time for either an assessment of Sczhau's chess or a winnowing of Hegel's dialectic.

The *Medea*, obeying prearranged cybernetic instructions of her own, chose an area just south of the northern polar cap and brought herself gently down. Ordinarily I should have finished the interim projects I had set myself before troubling to see what lay outside — for of what

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importance were a few hours when I must spend some two years of waiting for Earth to swing round again and catch me up? — but the ear-ringing silence that followed the sudden cessation of engine noise, coupled with an insidious personal malaise brought on by the lighter Martian gravity, made concentration impossible.

Since the *Medea* has no vision ports — these, according to Steven Sobieski, being found only in the minicomics and the tri-di space thrillers — I was forced to struggle into a clumsy airsuit and go bodily outside. I had anticipated a certain strangeness and desert harshness, but nothing of what awaited.

A man more susceptible to emotional disturbance, I think, must have been shattered on the instant by the wild alien bleakness that lay on every side; I have spent a lifetime in conditioning myself to accept the different as well as the logical and the beautiful, but I was strongly shaken by the sight and feel of my new domain. I am neither impressionist nor poet, yet I found myself thinking fancifully that here was a scene such as a cosmic Dali might have painted by spending eons instead of hours on contrasting detail, forswearing any petty obscuration of intent in the recording of a theme that was by its own nature surrealistic.

The surface was everywhere eroded and channeled by the action of wind and water into a trackless maze of chimneys and buttes and canyons, a stony wilderness reminiscent of my own Arizona badlands but on an infinitely more extended scale. Perhaps a mile to the north the polar snow, shining with an odd effect of fluorescence under a dwarfed white sun, billowed away in frozen stillness to a horizon surprisingly steep and close. To the south stretched a terrain (anomalous word here, but what other is there?) as rugged as that immediately about me, equally still and bleak but touched with myriad shadings of color from sullen red to ocher and saffron and purple and russet and black. Erosion, the slow leaching away of ages, must have borne away all soil here before there *was* soil on Earth, and deposited it with the melting snows to the south.

There was no suggestion of life, no faintest smudge of chlorophyll-bearing greenery. A dead world, I thought; far from being of any possible promise to the exploiters who had sent me, it was fit only for the two pursuits for which I had come: the enjoyment of inviolable privacy and of reflection.

I may have spent more time than I realized in considering that unforeseen irony, for the sun, already low on the too-near horizon, sank abruptly from sight. There was no twilight; darkness came suddenly with a great sweeping rush that had in it a curious effect of soundless thunder;

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the sky, black as sable and utterly free of cloud or haze, blazed from rim to rim with a dazzling pyrotechnic burst of frozen stars.

I went back through the swift-growing cold to the *Medea*, intending to resume my interrupted consideration of Sczhau and Hegel before attacking my project proper, but once inside I found it all but impossible to reach the necessary pitch of detached concentration. The silence of my metal cubicle was like an actual weight, broken only at distracting intervals by the crackling of still-cooling propulsion tubes and the soft purr-and-gurgle of my air purifiers.

A sudden and uncharacteristic restlessness seized upon me. Time enough to begin my thinking tomorrow, I decided; tonight I should devote to orienting myself to my new prospect and to sleeping under the stars.

With that end in view I broke out the collapsible sleeping unit that was a part of my emergency explorations gear and went outside again. It was a truly ingenious affair and performed its function perfectly, as Steven Sobieski had promised; once the oxygen-inflated membrane of the bubble had ballooned to a taut eight-foot sphere about me, I wriggled out of my uncomfortable airsuit and zipped myself snugly into the resilient cocoon of my bed.

So began my first night on Mars.

A strange night passed in a strange setting, but the most satisfactory, I think, of my life.

The first hour or two — I made no check, for of what importance was time to me now? — I spent in studying the stars and their relative arrangements. I know little of astronomy, but it was evident at once that here was a sight to wring tears from one who might. Through the thin night air the stars burned unwaveringly, like beacons; the few I recognized were enormously brighter than from Earth, and there were infinitely more of them — the Milky Way, far from its familiar undistinguished haziness, blazed from horizon to horizon with the cold spectacular splendor of a Frost Giants' bridge of powdered crystal.

The constellations seemed oddly askew — because, I supposed, of the variance in axial inclinations of Earth and Mars — but I made out the Great Bear at once, and Cassiopeia and the Twins. Orion, when I found him, had assumed an urgently ascensive stance, as if the mythical beast he pursued were fleeing uphill, but the individual brilliants of his framework stood out so clearly that I could readily distinguish the tiny continent-shape of the nebula depending from his belt.

I did not abandon my star-watching out of boredom, but because a more promising diversion presented itself — remembering.

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The deliberate exercise of memory, when one has a sufficient stock of material to give it scope, is a fascinating pursuit known to few and appreciated by fewer; my preoccupation with it, I think, marks one of my sharpest departures from the conventional average. By deliberate exercise I do not mean the mechanical recapitulation of data learned by rote and retained undigested, but the half-sensuous, half-cerebral faculty of reliving the experience itself, the esthetic savoring again of the incident or passage or theme that once pleased one most.

There is an indescribable pleasure in the mental reviewing of a seldom-seen play (*Troilus*, for example) and recalling the precise stance and expression of a minor character never meant to be remembered beyond the moment. Unfortunately, mine is not an eidetic memory, but I have developed it by careful usage to a surprising degree; I can hear at will thematic progressions of music, gay or somber as my mood chooses, that to most are lost without mechanical aid, or thrill again to the anguish of Euripides' Hecuba crying the vanity of Man.

But on this first Martian night, when I lay wrapped like a chrysalis in my insulated bed with only a tissue-thin membrane of plastic between myself and the frozen bleakness outside, I remembered none of these things. Instead I found myself casting back to the genesis of this moment, to the improbable chain of action and decision that had led to my being the first man on Mars.

Steven Sobieski, whom I had once known as well as I ever permitted myself to know anyone, was responsible for that choice. Steven knew me well; he was astute enough to send to my retreat in the Arizona Mogollons a picked delegation of specialists, with whose aims I might sympathize, rather than a pack of arrogant military men or fat commercial sponsors, and I could imagine precisely how he had briefed his emissaries.

"We're picking a man to stay sane through two years of hell," he would have said in characteristic staccato. "That's Charles Bathory. He'll like it — as soon be in Arizona as in heaven, or on Mars as in Arizona. Damned antiquarian, highbrow hermit; plumbed for ice-water instead of blood, but intelligent. Supercilious bastard — you'll hate his guts — but able. Very. Give us a nice cold-blooded account when he comes back, if he doesn't say the hell with us and stay there."

Steven's strategy worked, as he had known it must. No ordinary inducement could have dragged me from my books and my thinking, but it happened that I had just outlined a project which demanded complete privacy, and the thought of a year of absolute isolation — on Mars or elsewhere, the location was immaterial — was irresistible.

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Discomfort I could ignore. Danger? We all die. Loneliness? I seek loneliness as others seek companionship, and value it more than wealth.

I was asked if I would go to Mars. I would.

I landed and surveyed my new hermitage, I lay under the stars in a fragile bubble of plastic and pondered my reasons for being there. I mused, that first night, on myriad varying subjects, without conscious selection but always with an underlying relevance: on the slow rise (or decline, if you should be a Spenglerist) of Man, on his wars and his arts and religions and vices; on two atomic wars and the final planetary union that promised a world state and swift stagnation.

I thought finally of myself and was puzzled to find that my reflection, usually so direct and purposeful, should have run so far afield. I felt a distinct sense of release then and a concomitant relaxation, as if I had escaped from some psychic treadmill and were able again to follow my usual orderly bent.

But there was no pursuing this minor mystery, for the strain laid upon my sensibilities demanded rest. I slept.

And awoke at dawn with a shrunken sun shining in upon me and melting away a gossamer fall of hoarfrost outside. I felt greatly refreshed, invigorated now rather than nauseated by the light gravity, and fired with an unexpected eagerness to begin my project.

I was about to rise and struggle into my airsuit when I saw the offering.

It lay within inches of my face outside the transparent membrane of the sleeping bubble, filmed over lightly with swift-melting frost — a carefully heaped little mound of coral-tinted berries and a shapeless skin filled with something which from the fluidity of its shape before freezing could only be water.

For some time I lay without moving, a little stunned and altogether dismayed to know that I was not alone here after all. That there could be life in such an environment — intelligent life, obviously, since the concept of propitiary offering presupposes a certain amount of imagination — was difficult of belief, yet the evidence was undeniable. It was hard to repress a shudder at the thought that something during the night must have stood (crouched, squatted, perched?) outside my pressure bubble within inches of my sleeping person, fondling its clumsy little offering and watching the white plume of my breath rising and falling on the cold air inside; but my uneasiness stemmed from surprise rather than from fear, and was soon dissipated.

It was more reassuring to conclude that the creature, whatever it might be like physically, was at least amicable and perhaps even friendly, since

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the intervening membrane of my bubble could have offered scant resistance if it had been minded to attack. Too, the amount of effort involved in the foraging of its gift presupposed either a generous or a timorous nature, since gifts by their nature are designed either to ingratiate or to placate; calling to mind similar advances made to explorers by Earthly aborigines gave me cause to wonder if my visitor's motive might not even have been one of superstitious awe, and its offering an outright oblation.

The thought, far from pleasing me, left me more disturbed than before. I had no desire to be worshiped even at a distance; my project was already planned in detail and could bear no delay if it was to be completed before the end of the allotted two years forced my return to Earth. I wanted only to be left alone.

But nothing is ever resolved through groundless speculation, and it was evident that the creature was not yet ready to show itself. Accordingly I donned my airsuit, collapsed my pressure bubble again into its bedding unit, and returned to the *Medea*. The crude offering I took with me as a matter of course, since to ignore an advance so earnest were poor policy; commonsense demanded that I accept the gift or risk offending a creature of whose temper and physical capabilities I knew nothing.

Aboard ship I made breakfast — my first meal on Mars — and afterward, in a spirit less of scientific inquiry than of simple curiosity, I crushed a few of the coral-tinted berries and tested them with a chemical solution designed to reveal the presence of any toxic element. They were edible, I found, but I felt no inclination to sample them personally. Instead I sealed them in an evacuated container and forgot them.

Strangely, I still feel no desire at the moment to begin the project that brought me here. Rather, prompted by the same restless and uncharacteristic eagerness that fired me on awakening this morning, I have decided to unbolt the after compartment that houses the *Medea's* auxiliary craft — a tiny helicopter with huge folding wings designed to make the most of the thin Martian air — and fly southward on a preliminary tour of my new domain.

I am ready for that flight now. I bring my journal up to this point so that any who may follow me here will know, if I do not return, in what direction to look for my body.

Second Evening:

I have finished my initial reconnaissance, and the unaccustomed strain of managing the *Medea's* helicopter for so long a period has left me too tired to do more than bring my journal up to the moment before retiring

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for the night. The little time remaining is of no consequence; such pertinent facts as I have discovered are soon told.

At no point during my dreary, day-long flight did I find the scene below me substantially different from the eroded desolation in which the *Medea* landed, but my aerial examination did reveal the true nature of several phenomena which have puzzled astronomers for decades.

The *canali* do exist as physical markings, but in actual fact are precisely opposite in nature to the watercourses postulated by Schiaparelli and Lowell. They are not channels at all but outcroppings of stone or mineral strata which have resisted the attrition of time, wind and sand more stubbornly than surrounding terrain, enormous natural traverses which rise hundreds of feet above the usual monotony of buttes and canyons and run at times for thousands of miles in near-straight lines.

The darker areas seen after spring polar thaws are not vegetation but a sort of mottled discoloration arising, I think, from uneven absorption of water vapor by bare surfaces high enough to escape the ever-drifting sand. There *is* a hardy straggle of lichenous flora that fares somewhat better during the melting season — the pale coral berries left by my diffident visitor of last night, I find, are its fruit — but is so scanty that any exhaustive examination of it would prove an unprofitable undertaking. What a wearisome task the creature must have set itself in collecting even so small a quantity!

I found only one other point of real interest during the day: the two little moons, neither of which is visible from the *Medea* because of the planet's intervening equatorial bulk. Deimos, the farther and smaller, is barely visible by day as a tiny silver spark, apparently stationary and all but lost against a background of stars that shine palely in the blue-black sky. Phobos is hardly more impressive, at its best a near-saffron little disk totally bare of any distinguishing mark.

I made a number of panoramic photographs during the flight, but found on returning to the *Medea* just before nightfall that none of them revealed more than I had seen with my unaided eye. Accordingly I filed them away for a later and more intensive study and busied myself with the preparation of a meal of tinned foods and vitamin paste.

I am ready now to retire to my hammock for a quiet night of reflection upon the project that is to occupy the two-year period of my stay here.

Second Morning:

Last night, for the first time in my adult life, I failed miserably in an attempt to concentrate. The ideas I sought to grasp slid away like wary

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fish in a turbid pool. The muted gurgling of the ship's air purifiers was an irritant murmur seeping up through the tubular framework of my hammock to distract my attention, the narrow metal limits of my cubicle seemed to wall me in like one imprisoned in a vault.

The desolation outside appealed to me by contrast as clean and free, so far preferable to the suddenly odious confinement of the ship that I rose at once and donned my airsuit. I had already shouldered my emergency bedding unit and was on the point of opening the exit lock before it occurred to me that I might be visited again by the aboriginal creature that had left its offering outside my bubble last night.

The prospect was not a formidable one; I hesitated only a moment, considering, and when I had weighed the possible danger of sleeping outside against the certainty of spending an unsatisfactory night in the ship I found the risk so small as to be negligible.

I inflated the pressure bubble at the same spot as before, and, shrugging out of my airsuit and into my insulated bedding, was able immediately to relax in a manner impossible inside the metal prison of the *Medea*. The sleeping-bag was very warm and comfortable; the eroded desolation about me, softened by starshine and the faint shifting Phobos-glow from the south, lay like a surrealistic fairyland under an apocalyptic splendor of starry sky.

The project I had intended to consider did not come at once to mind, but its evasiveness seemed no longer to matter. I gave myself over instead to feeling rather than to thinking; and soon, prompted by some obscure urge whose origin I made no attempt to determine, I found myself remembering again.

There is, as I have said, an intense and sensuous pleasure in the controlled exercise of memory. Tonight, with the infinite peace and stillness of utter isolation lying soft and snug as a blanket about me, I turned back to incidents and impressions long dismissed as irrelevant but which returned now with a poignant warmth that stemmed less from nostalgia than from a conviction of significance never guessed before.

I have said too that mine is not truly an eidetic memory — but tonight it was more. I relived, in tactile reality, the formative years of my youth; I saw my parents again, a very ordinary couple preoccupied with the minutiae of living yet perceptive enough to be puzzled and distressed by my variation from the norm; I retraced my solitary way through lesser schools and university, dwelling for a time on my guarded association with Steven Sobieski and wondering for the thousandth time what it was that inspired him to batter as he had at the self-imposed barriers

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of my reserve. I remembered the death of my parents, recalling with perfect clarity such minor details as the careful greenness of the cemetery and the soft touch of summer air on my uncovered head, the faint sweet smell of distant honeysuckle and the muted sound of larks singing.

I felt again the slow shaping of character, the mounting sense of detachment from mundane futility that had moved me finally to live alone in tacit dedication to the discovery of true reality through the searching of my own soul.

There was a great deal of remembering, so much that the night was far gone before I had reached the end of it and was ready to consider my position of the moment. I felt a curious sense of incomplete peace — if such a term may have validity — as if I had somehow partially satisfied a powerful and long-denied want, and a strangely comforting conviction that I was the nearer for my very incompletion to some inexpressibly desirable goal.

For a long time I searched my mind for a clue to the nature of that goal, but arrived at no more than the vaguest of hints. The constellations wheeled overhead in slow procession; Orion left off his uphill chase and went down to the west in inverted frustration before I was able to arrange in any coherent form the half-identified conclusions that emerged.

I felt obscurely that I was somehow not a complete and finished entity — that no man was, or ever could be, alone — and that my lifelong dissatisfaction with such minor realities as I had been able to resolve stemmed from that incompleteness rather than from any flaw inherent in the world itself. That I was different from other men was entirely irrelevant, since that difference was essentially one of degree rather than of kind; those others were even more lost in confusion than I because they had, with a few notable exceptions, never guessed at their own incomplete state. Mine, I understood intuitively now without understanding precisely what it was that I lacked, was not a mental or moral unfinishedness but a psychic one.

With that anomalous conclusion my speculative mood left me as suddenly as it had come. Drowsiness swept over me with opiate authority.

I slept.

I awoke for the second time on Mars to find that I had anticipated the dawn by minutes. The palest flush of salmon color in the southeastern sky hinted that the sun hung just below the horizon, ready for rising; the stars had paled a little, though the sky was still black as sable, and some effect arising either from the night's bitter cold or from the sun's imminent appearance had set off a prismatic auroral display to the north

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that leaped and danced and flicked wild ghostly fingers down to the polar snow.

A strange enough awakening, but of more immediate urgency was the suggestion of motion that vanished, a shadow among darker shadows, between two tall chimney formations that stood like sentries in the predawn darkness. I sat up quickly, straining my eyes after my aboriginal visitor, and was all but blinded by the sudden glare of the sun's precipitate rising.

When I could see again by shielding my eyes with both hands against the horizontal flood of light, my caller had gone. His — its — offering lay outside the bubble as on the previous morning, within inches of my face, the twisted membrane of water frozen into characteristic liquid curves and the coral-tinted lichen-berries glistening white with hoarfrost.

There was more this time: in the center of a smooth patch of rime already evaporating under the sun's small heat, I saw my visitor's footprint.

It was quite distinct at first, a roughly oval spoor perhaps four inches long and bordered at equal intervals by fainter marks which radiated outward and might have been made by either talons or tendrils. The frost was gone within seconds, erasing the print from the bare rock, but I must have sat immobile for minutes while my imagination struggled to reconstruct the creature itself from its sign.

A futile effort, since I had no way of knowing how many such feet the thing might have, nor even if the member leaving such a track might really correspond to *foot* as I understood the term. It might have only the one, or many; it might have others of dissimilar nature and function. In any case the spoor it left gave me no more knowledge of its mentality and disposition that I had had before.

On that note I gave up speculation and went back to the *Medea* with my folded bed and my second offering. The chores at hand were soon done, for I had no inclination this morning to dawdle; I washed and shaved and made breakfast, and immediately afterward set about arranging the notes I had brought for a beginning on my project.

But again, as yesterday, I found myself unaccountably reluctant to begin the task. The issues that had seemed all-important on Earth seemed now suddenly negligible and impossibly remote; extraneous thoughts rose to distract me, and my wandering attention persisted stubbornly in turning back to the intuitive conviction of personal inadequacy that had come to me last night under the stars.

If a man be an incomplete entity, I thought, then what must he require for completion? What, and where, is his complement?

In essence the problem is as old as Man, and admits of no solution. Men

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in all ages have boasted answers devised to fit their philosophies and faiths, basing their conclusions on specious logic or blind assumption; others, with sophistry as vain or conviction as fanatic, have denied categorically that any such incompletion exists. My own situation, when I had done with considering it, involved a paradox so startling that I was at once bewildered and dismayed.

For I knew with unquestioning certainty that the complement to my personal deficiency lay here, yet I could identify neither lack nor complement — and with an equal certainty that brushed aside any power of logic to deny, I understood that I should know both, and soon.

It was not until far into the morning, when I had given up such fruitless puzzling in despair, that the method by which I had arrived at so singular a conviction came to me of itself with a suddenness that was the more disturbing for being itself without explanation.

I had *remembered* that I should know.

The realization left me torn between anxiety and anticipation, afraid that my sanity might have given way without my knowing yet eager to explore the possibilities inherent in the only alternative that remains.

For to remember with such conviction a thing not yet come about implies, by the very nature of its contradiction, either insanity or clairvoyance. The evidence admits of no other conclusion: I am mad, or I have stumbled upon the psychist's cherished but never substantiated faculty of foretelling the future.

I have rejected as a matter of course the thought of insanity, not because of any real improbability but because the unreason so implied must make any further attempt at logical analysis worse than useless. Its alternative I have considered at length, marshaling up every scrap of pertinent data that came to mind.

My conclusions, if not immediately demonstrable, are at least logical.

I am, to begin with, far better qualified than the average man to develop such a faculty as clairvoyance, which must in essence depend directly upon trained virtuosity of perception. I have never been bound as closely as most by the extraneous concerns which have in all ages distracted men from the truth; here I am able to dismiss those concerns entirely, and the result is a freedom of thought not known before.

In this bleak Martian desolation I have achieved a privacy impossible even on Crusoe's desert island. No human thought or action impinges upon that privacy to inhibit reflection; it follows naturally that total isolation must be the final requisite for the developing of such a power as has come to me, that absolute aloneness is a condition vital to the truly efficient coop-

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eration of mind and psyche. I may, through early training and present environment, be the first to approach the full consummation of human understanding.

Thought of my diffident visitor jarred somewhat against my logic but did nothing to shake it; rather, recalling the fugitive shadow I had seen at dawn seemed to spur my newly discovered faculty of remembering the yet unexperienced to further demonstration. The mental picture that followed electrified me with its implications.

For, though I had never explored in the direction of those twin chimneys even by air, *I remembered what lay behind them.*

The sensation was indescribable, though more than anything else like the operation of what the French have termed the *déjà vu*, that singular phenomenon of double memory in which simultaneous recollection of an experience seems superimposed upon the experience itself. The effect is relatively common, but has been catalogued by psychologists as a paramnesiac malfunctioning of normal memory processes — literally a sort of mnemonic backfiring — and dismissed as unimportant.

It is not unimportant. The *déjà vu*, I think, represents the first tentative stirrings of a fledgling perceptive power developing slowly to meet the new confusions that hamper communication between men.

The postulation should be easily tested. I shall put on my airsuit again and explore the terrain, never seen but so well remembered, that lies beyond the twin chimneys of eroded rock that lie just south of the *Medea*. If I find it familiar —

We shall see.

Third Evening:

Some small understanding of the pattern which I pursue has come to me since completing the entry above, bringing with it a measure of confidence that surprises me when I recall the confusion of mind that drove me from the *Medea* earlier. I have achieved a state of comparative calm since, but at that moment I fled the ship as I might have fled a prison.

Passing between the twin chimney-spires was like entering through a familiar gateway. A deep and narrow channel lay behind them, curving sharply to right and left; I followed it without hesitation, recognizing at sight each new downward turn and slant and ignoring a labyrinth of intersecting canyons that would have put a Minotaur's maze to shame.

I came finally to the spot to which my timorous visitor had disappeared, and found without surprise that he had fled again before my coming. The channel ended abruptly in a circular pit whose shelving walls reminded me

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forcibly of a sunken amphitheater, pierced to the south and west by innumerable minor channels which might have offered escape to the native but were manifestly too small to permit the passage of my own airsuited bulk.

But there was no point in continuing, for here lay the place I had remembered so vividly, the improbable habitat of my aboriginal Friday. The arena floor was bare of any shelter or bedding, a circumstance which puzzled me until I realized that a creature able to endure the bitter rigors of the Martian night would certainly feel no need of protection against the elements. The place actually was quite without sign of occupation except for a curious symbol whose construction my coming had interrupted.

At the center of the pit a precise ring perhaps ten feet in diameter had been outlined in rough small lumps of mineral ores of various shapes and colors, all laid with meticulous care so that each overlapped the one adjoining to form a continuous contact throughout the figure. No single nugget showed any trace of shaping or cleavage, making it obvious that the aboriginal builder had found them in their natural state.

Inside the ring another figure, fashioned from similar but larger lumps, had been begun; I traced the half-finished pattern and found that, once done, it would form a very creditable pentagram whose points would everywhere touch the ambient limits of the circle.

To find such a design here was at once surprising and amusing, for the reason that a circumscribed pentacle is on Earth one of the oldest of cabalistic symbols and is traditionally linked with the conjuring up of demons. For the first time since touching Mars — indeed for the first time in some years — I was moved to laugh outright, for the idea that any such occult hocus-pocus might be intended here was too preposterous for consideration.

The arrangement, I concluded, was entirely irrelevant until I should have more information, being like any other product of an alien mind totally incomprehensible to human understanding. It might represent any concept from the aborigine's crude urge toward esthetic expression to the eminently practical beginning of a nest or dwelling, and revealed nothing more than I knew already of the creature's nature.

The unfinished state of the symbol itself was more informative. That no such bits of comparatively pure metals lay about on the wind-swept surface I knew already — hence, by simple inference, these must have been gathered from somewhere below ground. The planet's crust, subjected through temperature variations to extremely powerful stresses and to the perpetual erosion of melting polar snows, must be fissured and riven with subterranean channels and cavities that might hide any number of such fragments. This in turn meant that the creature who had collected the nuggets before

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me must have delved for them into God alone knows what perilous clefts and caverns.

I remembered such a cavern.

My new sense of prognosis recalled the place to me in explicit detail, a warped and vasty chamber adrip with frozen stalactites and hushed with the silence of a tomb closed for eons. Its floor was corrugated by ages of erosion that had worn unevenly over harder and softer strata, and in the troughs between projecting ribs of rock I remembered rich scatterings of the mineral lumps needed to complete the pattern at my feet.

The entrance to the place lay just north of the *Medea*, within an hour's walk; tomorrow, I resolved on the instant, I would go immediately after breakfast and bring back as many as I could carry of the nuggets most urgently needed.

But at the moment it was imperative that I return to the ship, for the sun was slanting low toward the amphitheater wall and it could not be long before the shutter-swift fall of night.

I went back at once to the *Medea*, where I made a hasty meal and set about bringing my journal up to the moment. When I have done with this entry I shall put on my airsuit again and go out to spend a third night under the stars, where I shall explore my new faculty to its conclusion.

I hope too that I shall find there the answer to a question which has only now risen to disturb me: why did I resolve so spontaneously, in the pit, to undertake a mission which cannot possibly be of benefit to me?

Third Morning:

The question with which I closed this account last night has been answered in part, though such explanation as I am able to offer relates only to effect and not to cause.

My purpose in gathering nuggets of a particular size and content is to finish immediately the circle-and-pentagram symbol in the pit, but the end involved in a commission so inexplicable is still beyond me. I shall know that purpose once the thing is done — my increasingly vivid "memories" of what is yet to come convince me of that — but for the present I must content myself with such meager information as I have.

I have prepared my morning meal and put on coffee to boil; while it is in the making I shall set down quickly as much as I can recall of what I thought and remembered last night.

My mood from the beginning was a receptive one, colored by a sense of anticipation that exceeded anything felt on either preceding night. The glorious stellar display overhead had lost none of its impressiveness, nor

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the bleak eroded wilderness any of its desolate charm; I felt the awesome presence of both more keenly, I think, than ever, but with an added impact of meaning lost on me before.

I had not meant to attempt so soon another beginning on the project that had brought me here, having learned from experience that the pleasure of remembering and the urgency of knowing would permit no serious concentration on a matter so academic. But some perverse quirk of association brought to mind that very project, and I found now that it was not to be denied.

That project was, in essence, to determine for myself not what is reality (for any abstract conception must of necessity be relative, and therefore subject to multiple variations) but what are the possible realities, the probable and the inevitable. The world, said Schopenhauer, is Idea, fashioned by Will — but whose Idea is valid, and whose Will makes it so?

I understood last night, as I could never have understood in the smoky turmoil of Earth, that my project was impossible of consummation because there are no such relative realities lying within the scope of human comprehension. Man is an emmet fumbling myopically at the walls of his nest and theorizing emptily on values that have no meaning except to himself. There are basic realities, I know now, but they are of no concern to us because they are beyond our imagining; greater races than Man have sought them without success, and have bowed to the same finality that has defeated me. The universe is itself a transient thing, ephemeral as a mist in the morning, fragile as a spider's web in the wind. Nothing is eternal, and therefore actual, unless it be silence, which is the ultimate negation of action and of being.

I determined none of this for myself. *I remembered it.*

And almost — so nearly that I struggled up in my insulated cocoon of bedding with a startled, eager cry on my lips — I remembered who it was that had told me.

But the memory was gone at once, or had never been. For a time I lay tense and wondering, puzzling over the death of my old methodical detachment; but the soft warmth of my bed was infinitely comfortable and the lure of exploring my new talent further was irresistibly tempting. I relaxed finally and gave myself over to the exquisite pleasure of remembering.

I remembered, among other things, a tediously pedestrian treatise which likened the mind to an electronic computer with specially reserved sections for the storing of mnemonic data, fitted with complex banks of neurons each holding its hoarded stock of minutiae ready for presentation on demand. A neat enough analogy for describing the gross operation of a mechanistic function, I thought, but one falling far short of the truth. For how could

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a purely reactive memory, whose function is based on experience and the recapitulation of experience, contain such a faculty as mine for remembering things not yet happened?

Obviously, memory serves another purpose than that of simple recording. But what other?

My response was not an answer but the promise of an answer.

I should know tomorrow.

Drowsiness came then and I gave myself over to it eagerly, secure in the knowledge that I should have my answer because I had remembered that I should.

At some vague transitional point between waking and sleeping I was dimly conscious of a tiny creature that hopped past my bubble and paused for a moment to observe me with dumb and eyeless regard, but I had fallen asleep before curiosity could rouse me enough to investigate.

The sun was shining when I awoke, and for the first time there was no offering outside my bubble.

I dismissed the matter without surprise, remembering that it had been from the beginning no more than a preliminary gambit and that its further repetition was not necessary, and went directly to the *Medea* with my bedding.

I have had my breakfast now and am ready to go north to the cavern that holds the nuggets I need.

The exhilaration that follows a night of sleeping under the stars is still with me. I have a subdued feeling of wonder that I could so quickly have discarded the selfish logic of a lifetime to pursue a venture not of my own planning, but I feel no uncertainty because I have just remembered that another reward infinitely more desirable than knowledge alone awaits the completion of my mission.

I am eager to claim it.

Fourth Evening:

I should not bother to make this final entry except for the obligation I feel toward those who sent me here. I owe them at least a complete record of what has happened; that it will not be believed is entirely irrelevant.

Another ship will come some day — it cannot be long, knowing as I do the driving impatience of my own kind — and its crew will find my journal, pore over it and shake their heads. Poor Bathory, they will say, he was a queer one from the beginning. We might have known he'd crack.

And they will search the wasteland and the caverns beneath for my bones, but they will never find them.

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I recall having said earlier that form as an esthetic end has always appealed to me more than content, but that conviction has gone the way of many others since the *Medea* brought me here. From this point I shall drop any pretense of semantic exactness; it is enough that I leave word that I have found what all men seek, and have sought, since there were men.

But I must hurry, for my time is short.

I found the cavern precisely as I had remembered it, a vast silent grotto roofed with stalactites that glittered like ice in the light of my hand-lamp. The floor was rough and uneven with transverse corrugations of rock strata, and between the stony ribs, buried in riffles of shining metallic sand too heavy to be washed away by the rushing polar thaws, I found the nuggets for which I had come.

There was no difficulty of selection, for I remembered in explicit detail the shapes and sizes and colors required. I rooted out the water-rounded bits as eagerly as ever a mundane prospector scrabbled for gold, discarding some and dropping others into a tough plastic bag brought from the ship. And when the bag was full I carried it up out of the cavern on my shoulders, like a peon bearing ore from Conquistadorial mines, and took it straight to the pit that lay beyond the twin-chimney-spires.

A part of my reward was granted when I set foot in the arena with its unfinished symbol. The little foot-shaped creature that had made its print in the hoarfrost outside my bubble was there already, waiting; it looked as eyelessly incurious as it had looked last night when it paused to peer in at me, but I knew that under its blank exterior it was as eager as I.

I remembered a great deal more. It was the little builder who had brought me the tokens of berries and water and who had toiled day after wearisome day before my coming to build up the circle-and-pentagram symbol to its present half-finished state. The creature was native to this desolate place, a quasi-intelligent life form too low on the scale of development to have even a coherent idea of itself as a discrete entity; it identified itself by a vague mental impulse that corresponded audibly to a weak hiss, and it worked, as I worked, for a reward.

But there was a difference: this creature felt none of the sense of incompletion that had distressed me earlier; its bounty was bestowed only for the present, and it would forget later in its dim alien way that anything unusual had ever happened to disturb its half-sentient existence. My own case was another matter — I should be rewarded further.

By whom?

I should know when the symbol was finished. I remembered that I should, and the memory was assurance enough.

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I left Hiss, the little builder, struggling with fanatic precision to align the fragments I had dumped out of my carrying-bag, and went immediately back to the cavern for more.

The design was nearing completion when I returned; the little builder had exhausted its pile of nuggets and was waiting with moveless patience for more. I emptied my bag upon the bare rock for its employment and rested briefly, drinking in the memories that pressed upon me in payment.

It was amusing to learn — paradoxically, by remembering! — that I was right in supposing my mnemonic center to serve a double purpose, for these were not memories at all but registered as such because the faculty for perceiving them directly did not exist in me. One deaf cannot hear sound, but may feel the duller vibrations and interpret them through tactile translation, substituting one sense for another; it was so with me and, after a different fashion, with the little Martian who toiled at my feet. What Hiss and I felt was not communication but the overtones of communication.

With whom?

I should know when the symbol was finished.

My third trip to the pit brought the pentacle to within bare minutes of completion, but I did not linger this time for payment. The declining flood of late afternoon sunlight told me that I should have to hurry if I meant to finish before darkness fell, so I dumped the contents of my carrying-bag for the little Martian to sort and went hastily back to the cavern again.

I had not needed to linger. My reward went with me.

All the way back to the cavern I found myself remembering, with a clarity keener than any recollection, the nature of the one for whom I toiled.

He comes from a world beyond the scattering of stars we know — how can I say *where*, how put down in cold sterile print such concepts (space and time are only two of many) as are beyond any power of print to define? — that is only one of myriads flung across a vaster cosmos of which our own universe is no more than a minor facet.

He is not a corporeal entity in any definable sense, and he travels from world to world without the need of clumsy ships, flashing here or there across the gulf as his fancy chooses. He has traveled so for millennia, and will travel so for millennia more. An ironic truth occurs to me here: he has been revealed to men before, briefly and in varying guises of their own imaginings, through the operation of a natural function stumbled upon by our ancients and hailed by them as a magical law of symbolism.

For while he needs no physical vehicle, he must have a material matrix to collect his energies and project his force-pattern intact, and men have come upon the design of that matrix before. The circle-and-pentacle is such

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a one; the crude makeshift which Hiss and I are building is designed to that end, to permit him to focus his energies again for a return to the world from which he came.

How did he happen to be stranded here, helpless, when I came? I know, but cannot explain the concepts involved. I remember a vast confusion of clashing forces that might have been an etheric hurricane lashing the spatial seas between universes, a freakish intergalactic typhoon that cast him adrift.

His name, if the clear strong resonance of thought that distinguishes him from others of his kind can be called a name, resounds within me like the plucking of a giant cello string:

THRUMM!

I am the means of his escape, and my reward is completion.

For he and his people are the natural complements of men, and will be so universally when men have climbed high enough to search out the answer to their ancient need. As a slave is without a master — I use the analogy proudly — so was I without *Thrumm.*

I could not bear existence alone now that I have known him, and for that reason we shall never be separated.

I have stopped long enough at the *Medea* to finish the entry begun earlier, but I must go quickly now. I would not risk the delay at all but for two debts which I feel should be honored: to leave behind a complete record for those who sent me here and to acknowledge to Steven Sobieski, that I, who was once too jealous of my freedom to tolerate even the friendship of others, am now a servant or less.

But I do not find my new status debasing. Rather I take a quiet pride in it, and feel a retrospective amusement for the egoism that colored my thought from the moment I first awoke in my sleeping bubble and found the offering of berries and water outside.

For I had assumed that the token was designed, like any other gift in my experience, either to ingratiate or to propitiate. I was wrong; it was not an offering, but an overture.

How does one make friends with a dog? One speaks softly and gives it a bone.

I was as mistaken in thinking of myself as a Crusoe and of *Thrumm* as a supplicant man Friday, for our true positions were precisely reversed from the beginning. But I have retrieved my error. My labors have made it possible for him to escape the desert planet upon which chance made him a castaway, and he has rewarded me with companionship and passage home.

We leave tonight, as soon as his etheric raft is completed — *Thrumm*, the master, and I, his man Bathory.

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Fire is, in Bradbury's recent FAHRENHEIT 451 *as in the Norse myth of Loki and Ragnarök, the symbol of evil destruction. But symbolically it is also the gift of Prometheus and of the Holy Spirit. . . .*

The Firefighter

by ROBERT ABERNATHY

THE FIRE DANCES, and spits at the dark, puts out red and yellow and orange tongues at the crying night. We sit by the fire and are not afraid.

In the darkness great padded feet go by with snuffing breath, and hooved feet ring fleeing over the flinty ledges, and down by the unseen waterhole some creature screams briefly as hunter finds hunted. And sometimes eyes flash red or green from beyond the circle of firelight, but they do not venture near.

And out there, somewhere in the wolfish dark, walks the Firefighter. . . .

The wind is chill, rattling the reeds along the water's edge and moving cold ripples there. This evening, in the gathering dusk, we shivered on the stony slopes and among the thorny thickets, bundling up dry grass and branches. When the first star shone, the old man Hulan labored for us all, muttering words of power, striking the chosen flints to catch a spark in a pinch of tinder from his skin pouch, the good tinder made from the shelf-fungus that grows high on rotting trunks. . . . Now here is the fire and around it a place of warmth until morning.

The tall youth Keraz flings a fresh handful of sticks on the fire, and the fire leaps high and laughs at the night. Keraz' hand seeks and finds the hand of the girl beside him; her drowsy head rests on his shoulder.

The child in its mother's arms stretches hands to the fire and chuckles. Its young mother draws it back and scolds, but softly: "Hush, baby, hush. The Firefighter will hear you."

Gray old Hulan starts from his nodding doze, looks round at the shadows beyond the light. His lips move, and his fingers fumble with the tinder pouch on its thong about his neck.

Out there somewhere the Firefighter stalks. He walks upright like one of us, and in his great crooked hands he carries a massive club or a crude ax of stone. But he is shaggy all over with black hair, and beneath the sloping

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bones of his forehead is no knowledge of the fire, but only a terrible fear and hatred of it.

The Firefighter is huge and stronger than all of us, but he is not strong enough. When the flames dance high he is afraid like the other beasts. He smells the smoke from afar and growls speechless hate in his throat. If he were strong enough or cunning enough, he would stamp out every fire in the world, and the nights would be black for him and his kind to walk in darkness forever.

Across the fire Hulan beckons silently to young Keraz. He takes from his neck the pouch with the chosen flints and the tinder; he presses it into the young man's unwilling hand. "Take these, and keep them safely for me and after me. I have already taught you their use, all the secrets. When the buffalo charged four days ago, I was lucky; my heart in me knows I shall not be lucky much longer."

He brushes Keraz' protests aside with authority. "Tonight," he says, "you shall watch and keep the fire."

The youth subsides into his place on the farther side of the flames. He knots the thong about his neck, staring darkly into the darkness, feeling the others' eyes.

The night deepens and the cries of the hunting beasts diminish. We sleep, huddled in furs and skins close to our friend, the fire. Old Hulan sleeps, and stirs and groans in his slumber.

The young man watches, chin heavy in his hands. From time to time he feeds twigs and branches to the flickering blaze, and the shadows draw back and the fire crackles loudly above the sleepers' breathing.

Keraz looks down at the parted lips of the girl curled sleeping beside him, and back to the fire's heart of glowing coals, aflame and always changing, radiant and never again the same. . . . His head is weary and his eyes are darkened by too much light and too many dreams. The fire burns low and lower, the surrounding shadows move stealthily along the ground and descend noiselessly from the air above us. . . .

The Firefighter comes.

He roars, and hurls a stone that no man could lift, full into the midst of the fire. It is smothered, the coals flung far and wide. The shadows leap. In the smoke and smoldering glare as we awaken the Firefighter stands like a nightmare, crooked and black, lifting a great branch torn from a tree.

We struggle, dazed, to rise and flee, for there is no hope but in flight. Someone screams; the young mother sobs and clutches her child.

The Firefighter roars.

Old Hulan totters to his feet and forward, straight into the subman's path, between him and the scattered remnants of the fire. For a moment the

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Firefighter falters, while we flee, scattering like the sparks. . . . The little eyes glint cruel under their massive brow ridges, and the great club descends.

We flee stumbling in the blackness, unheeding the sharp flints and thorns, seeking shelter like lizards in the dark crevices of the hillside rocks, like monkeys in the tops of trees. When we look back, we see him running, shaggy and black, to and fro among the strewn brands of the fire, stamping them out, beating them out with his club, searching out every spark.

The last spark flares briefly up, winks redly and goes out, and the night falls, absolute. The wind is cold.

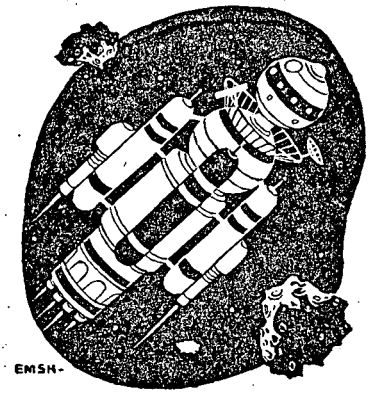
We shiver in our hiding places, and listen. We hear the voice of the Firefighter, calling to his own kind, bellowing, wordless, his hatred and his triumph over the fire and the people of the fire. We hear his shuffling tread as he prowls among the rocks, sniffing and rumbling deep in his chest.

It is night, and the beast walks in the darkness that he loves, as it was in all the ages past.

But yet a little while and the east will lighten. In the gray dawn we will steal forth from our hiding places. We will call softly to one another and find one another again, we, the People of the Fire.

And we will make the fire again.

I, Keraz, who slept — I will strike the flints, and blow upon the flame, and it shall not be forgotten.



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There's no need by now to introduce John, the wandering ballad-singer and spell-breaker of Manly Wade Wellman's stories. This is the fifth of his adventures that we've published; a few more, and we hope some perceptive publisher will collect the series in permanent book form. For, as you all know, the genuine folklore and poetry of folk-prose in these stories has raised the tale of supernatural evil to a new (and authentically American) high level.

Call Me From the Valley

by MANLY WADE WELLMAN

DOWN IT RAINED, on hill and hollow, the way you'd think the sky was too heavy to hold it back. It fell so thick and hard fish could have swum in it, all around where we sat holed up under the low wide porch of the country store — five of us. A leather-coated deputy sheriff with a pickup truck. A farmer, who'd sheltered his mule wagon in a shed behind. The old storekeeper, and us two strangers in that part of the hills, a quiet old gentleman and me with my silver-strung guitar.

The storekeeper hung a lantern to the porch rafters as it got dark. The farmer bought us all a bottle of soda, and the storekeeper broke us open a box of cookies. "Gentlemen, you'll all be here for a spell, so sit comfortable," he said. "Friend," he said to me, "did I ask your name?"

"John," I named myself.

"Well, John, do you play that there guitar you're a-toting?"

I played and sang for them, that old song about the hunter's true love:

Oh, call me sweetheart, call me dear,
Call me what you will,
Call me from the valley low,
Call me from the hill. . . .

Then there was talk about old things and thoughts. I recollect what some of them said:

Such as, you can't win solitaire by cheating just once, you've got to keep cheating; some animals are smarter than folks; who were the ancients who

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dug mine-holes in the Toe River country, and what were they after, and did they find it; nobody knows what makes the lights come and go like giant fireflies every night on Brown Mountain; you'll never see a man exactly six feet tall, because that was the height of the Lord Jesus.

And the farmer, who next to me was the youngest there, mentioned love and courting, and how when you true-love someone and need your eyes and thoughts clearest, they mist up and maybe make you trouble. That led to how you step down a mullein stalk toward your true love's house, and if it grows up again she loves you; and how the girls used to have dumb suppers, setting plates and knives and forks on the table at night and each girl standing behind a chair put ready, till at midnight the candles blew out and a girl saw, or she thought she saw, a ghosty-looking somebody in the chair before her, that was the appearance of the somebody she'd marry.

"Knew of dumb suppers when I was just a chap," allowed the storekeeper, "but most of the old folks then, they didn't relish the notion. Said it was a devil-made idea, and you might call in something better left outside."

"Ain't no such goings-on in this day and time," nodded the farmer. "I don't take stock in them crazy sayings and doings."

Back where I was born and raised, in the Drowning Creek country, I'd heard tell of dumb suppers but I'd never seen one, so I held my tongue. But the deputy grinned his teeth at the farmer.

"You plant by the moon, don't you?" he asked. "Above-ground things like corn at the full, and underground things like 'taters in the dark?"

"That ain't foolishness, that's the true way," the farmer said back. "Ask anybody's got a lick of sense about farming."

Then a big wiggling three-forked flash of lightning struck, it didn't seem more than arm's-length off, and the thunder was like the falling in of the hills.

"Law me," said the old gentleman, whose name seemed to be Mr. Jay. "That was a hooter."

"Sure God was," the farmer agreed him. "Old Forney Meechum wants us to remember he makes the rain around here."

My ears upped like a rabbit's. "I did hear this is the old Meechum-Donovant feud country," I said. "I've always been wanting to hear the true tale of that. And what about Forney Meechum making the rain — isn't he dead?"

"Deader than hell," the storekeeper told me. "Though folks never thought he could die, thought he'd just ugly away. But him and all the Meechum and Donovant men got killed. Both the names plumb died out, I reckon, yonder in the valley so low where you see the rain a-falling the lavishest. I used to hear about it when I was just a chap."

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"Me, too," nodded the deputy. "Way I got it, Forney Meechum went somewheres west when he was young. Was with the James boys or the Younger boys, or maybe somebody not quite that respectable."

"And when he come back," took up the storekeeper again, "he could make it rain whenever it suited him."

"How?" I asked, and old Mr. Jay was listening, too.

"Ain't rightly certain how," said the farmer. "They tell he used to mix up mud in a hole, and sing a certain song. Ever hear such a song as that, John?"

I shook my head *no*, and he went on:

"Forney Meechum done scarier things than that. He witched wells dry. And he raised up dead ghosts to show him where treasure was hid. Even his own kinfolks was scared of him, and all the Meechums took orders from him. So when he fell out with Captain Sam Donovant over a property line, he made them break with all the Donovants."

"Fact," said the storekeeper, who wanted to tell part of the tale. "And them Meechums did what he told them, saving only his cousin's oldest girl, Miss Lute Meechum, and she'd swore eternal love with Captain Ben Donovant's second boy Jeremiah."

Another lightning flash, another thunder growl. Old Mr. Jay hunched his thin shoulders under his jeans coat, and allowed he'd pay for some cheese and crackers if the storekeeper'd fetch it out to us.

"Law me," said the farmer. "I ain't even now wanting to talk against Forney Meechum. But they tell he'd put his eye on Lute himself, and he'd quarreled with his own son Derwood about who'd have her. But next court day at the county seat, was a fight betwixt Jeremiah Donovant and Derwood Meechum, and Jeremiah stuck a knife in Derwood and killed him dead."

Mr. Jay leaned forward in the lantern light. It showed the gray stubble on his gentle old face. "Who drew the first knife?" he asked.

"I've heard tell Derwood drew the knife, and Jeremiah took it away and stuck it into him," said the farmer. "Anyway, Jeremiah Donovant had to run from the law, and down in the valley yonder the Meechums and the Donovants began a-shooting at each other."

"Fact," the storekeeper took it up again as he fetched out the cheese and crackers. "That was 50 years back, the last fight of all. Ary man on both sides was killed, down to boys of ten-twelve years. Old Forney called for rain, but somebody shot him just as he got it started."

"And it falls a right much to this day," said the farmer, gazing at the pour from the porch eaves. "That valley below us is so rainy it's a swamp like. And the widows and orphans that was left alive, both families, they was purely rained out and went other places to live."

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"What about Miss Lute Meechum?" I asked next.

"I wondered about her, too," said Mr. Jay.

"Died," said the storekeeper. "Some folks say it was pure down grief killed her, that and lonesomeness for that run-off Jeremiah Donovant. I likewise heard tell old Forney shot her when she said for once and all she wouldn't have him."

The deputy sipped his soda. "All done and past now," he said. "Looks like we're rained in here for all night, gentlemen."

But we weren't. It slacked off while we ate our cheese, and then it was just a drip from the branches. The clouds shredded, and a moon poked through a moment, shy, like a girl at her first play-party. The deputy got up from the slab bench where he'd been sitting.

"Hope my truck'll wallow up that muddy road to town," he said. "Who can I carry with me?"

"I got my mule," added the farmer. "I'll follow along and snake you out when you get stuck in one of them mud holes. John, you better ride with me, you and Mr. Jay."

I shook my head. "I'm not going to town, thank you kindly. I'm going down that valley trail. Swore to an old friend I'd be at his family reunion, up in the hills on the yonder side, by supper time tomorrow."

Mr. Jay said he'd be going that way, too. The storekeeper offered to let us sleep in his feed shed, but I said I'd better start. "Coming, sir?" I asked old Mr. Jay.

"After while," he told me, so I went on alone. Three minutes down trail between those wet dark trees, and the lantern light under the porch was gone as if it had never shone.

Gentlemen, it was lonesome dark and damp going. I felt my muddy way along, with my brogan shoes squashy-full of water. And yet, sometimes, it wasn't as lonesome as you might call for. There were soft noises, like whispers or crawlings; and once there was a howl, not too far away, like a dog, or a man trying to sound like a dog, or maybe the neither of them. For my own comfort I began to pick the guitar and sing to myself; but the wrong tune had come unbidden:

In the pines, in the pines,
Where the sun never shines,
And I shiver where the wind blows cold! . . .

I stopped when I got that far, it was too much the truth. And it came on to rain again.

I hauled off my old coat to wrap my guitar from it. Not much to see ahead,

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but I knew I kept going down slope and down slope, and no way of telling how far down it went before it would start up to go to the hills where my friend's kinfolks would gather tomorrow. I told myself I was a gone gump not to stay at the store, the way I was so kindly bid. I hoped that that old Mr. Jay had the sense to stay under cover. But it was too far to go back. And I'd better find some place out of the wet, for my guitar more than me.

Must have been a bend to that trail, because I came all at once in view of the light in the cabin's glass window, before I notioned there was any living place around. The light looked warm yellow through the rain, and I hastened my wet feet. Close enough in, I could judge it was an old-made log house, the corners notch-locked and the logs clay-chinked, and the wide eaves with thick-split shakes on them, but I couldn't really see. "Hello, the house!" I yelled out.

No sound back. Maybe the rain was keeping them from hearing me. I felt my way to the flat door-stone and knocked. No stir inside.

Groping for a knob, I found none, only a leather latch string, old style. And, old style, it was out. In my grandsire's day, a latch string out meant come in. I pulled, and a wooden latch lifted inside and the door swung in before me.

The room was lit from a fireplace full of red coals, and from a candle stuck on a dish on a table middleway of the puncheon floor. That table took my eye as I stepped in. A cloth on it, and a plate of old white china with knife and fork at the sides, and a cup and saucer, yes and a folded napkin. But no food on the table, no coffee in the cup. A chair was set to the plate, and behind the chair, her hands crossed on its back, stood a woman, young and tall and proud-standing.

She didn't move. Nothing moved, except the candle flame in the stir of air from the open door. She might have been cut from wood and put up there to fool folks. I closed the door against the hard drum of the rain, and tracked wet marks on the puncheons as I came toward the table. I took off my old hat, and the water fell from it.

"Good evening, ma'am," I said.

Then her dark eyes moved in her pale face, her sweet, firm-jawed face. Her short, sad mouth opened, slow and shaky.

"You're not —" she started to mumble, half to herself. "I didn't mean —"

There was a copper light moving in her hair as she bent her head and looked down into the empty plate, and then I remembered that talk under the store porch.

"Dumb supper," I said. "I'm right sorry. The rain drove me in here. I reckon this is the only house around, and when nobody answered I walked in. I didn't mean to bother you."

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And I couldn't help but look at how she'd set the dumb supper out. Knowing how such things weren't done any more, and hearing that very thing said that night, I was wondered to find it. Through my mind kept running how some scholar-men say it's a way of doing that came over from the Old Country, where dumb suppers were set clear back to the beginning of time. Things that old don't die easy after all, I reckoned.

"He'll still come and sit down," she said to me in her soft voice, like a low-playing flute heard far off. "I've called him and he'll come."

I hung my wet coat by the fireplace, and she saw my guitar.

"Sing to help guide him," she said to me.

I looked at her, so proudly tall behind the chair. She wore a long green dress, and her eyes were darker than her copper hair, that was all in curly ringlets.

"Sing," she said again. "Tole him here."

I felt like doing whatever she told me. I swung the guitar in front of me, and began the song I'd given them at the store:

Oh, call me sweetheart, call me dear,
Call me what you will,
Call me from the valley low,
Call me from the hill.

I hear you as the turtle dove
That flies from bough to bough,
And as she softly calls her mate,
You call me softly now. . . .

One long hand waved me to stop, and I stopped with the silver strings still whispering to both of us. I felt my ears close up tight, the way they feel when you've climbed high, high on a mountain top.

"There's a power working here," I said.

"Yes," she barely made herself heard.

The fire, that had been just coals, found something to blaze up on. Smoke rose dark above the bright flames. The rain outside came barreling down, and there was a rising wind, too, with a whoop and shove to it that made the lock-joints of the cabin's logs creak.

"Sounds like old Forney Meechum's hard at work." I tried to make half a joke, but she didn't take it as such. Her dark-bright eyes lifted their lids to widen, and her hands, on the chair back again, took hold hard.

"Forney doesn't want me to do this," she told me, as if it was my ordinary business.

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"He's dead," I reminded her, like to a child.

"No," she shook her copper head. "He's not dead, not all of him. And not all of me, either."

I wondered what she meant, and I stepped away from the fire that was burning bright and hot.

"Are you a Meechum or a Donovant?" I asked.

"A Meechum," she told me. "But my true love's a Donovant."

"Like Lute Meechum and Jeremiah Donovant?"

"You know about that." Her hands trembled a mite, for all they held so hard to the chair. "Who are you?"

"My name's John." I touched the strings to make them whisper again. "Yes, I know the tale about the feud. Old Forney Meechum, who could witch down the rain, said Lute Meechum mustn't have Jeremiah —".

"He's here!" she cried out, with all her loud voice at last.

The wind shook the cabin like a dice-box. The shakes on the roof must have ruffled worse than a hen's feathers. Up jumped the fire, and out winked the candle.

Jumpy myself, I was back against the logs of the wall, my free hand on a shelf-plank that was wedged there. The rain had wetted the clay chinking soft between the logs, and a muddy trickle fell on my fingers. I was watching the fire, and its dirty gray smoke stirred and swelled, and a fat-looking puff of it came crawling out like a live thing.

The smoke stayed in one bunch. It hung there, a sort of egg-shaped chunk of it, hanging above the stones of the hearth. I think the girl must have half fallen, then caught herself; for I heard the legs of the chair scrape on the puncheons. The smoke molded itself, in what light I could make out, and looked solid and shapy, as tall as me but thicker, and two streamy coils waving out in the air like arms.

"Don't!" the girl was begging something. "Don't let him —"

On that shelf at my hand stood a dish and an empty old bottle, the kind of bottle the old glassmakers blew a hundred years ago. I took up the dish in my right fist. I saw that smoke-shape drifting sort of slow and greedy, clear from the hearth, and between those two wavy streamy arm-coils rose up a lumpy thing like a head. There was enough firelight to see that this smoke was thicker than just smoke; it must have soot and ash-dust in it, solid enough to choke you. And in that lumpy head hung two dull sparks, for the eyes.

Gentlemen, more about it than that you'd not care to have me tell you.

I flung the dish, and it went singing through the room and it went straight for where I threw, but it didn't stop. It sailed right on past and into the fireplace, and I heard it smash to pieces on the stones. Where it had hit the

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smoke-shape, there showed a notchy hole all the way through, where the cheek would be on a living creature. And whatever it was I'd thrown at, it never stopped its slow drift over toward the table, gray and thick and horrible. And in the chimney the wind stomped up and down, like a dasher in a churn.

"No," the girl wailed again, and moved back, dragging the chair along with her.

Then at once I saw what was in whatever that thing had for a mind, and I ran at the table too, passing so close to one of the smoke-streamers that the wind I made fluttered it like a rag. Just as it slid in toward the chair, bending to sit down, I slapped my guitar across the seat with the silver strings up.

I'd figured right. It couldn't touch the silver, being an evil haunt. It moved behind the table, and its sparks flickered at us both. I felt a creeping hot smelly sense, like dirty smoke. It made me feel sick and shake-legged, but I made my eyes look back at those two glaring sparks.

"Are you Forney Meechum?" I asked at it." Want to sit down at this dumb supper? Think it was laid out for you?"

It swayed back and forth, like a tree-branch, and outside the rain fell in its bucketfuls.

I moved quick around the table, with the guitar held toward it. I'd thought it moved slow, but it was across the room to the other side the way a shadow flings itself when you move the lamp. I ran after it, quick, and got to the door first.

"Not out this way," I yelled at it, and jabbed a finger into wet clay chinking between logs. I quick marked a cross on the inside of the door planks. Then the Forney Meechum thing was sliding at the window.

"Not that way, either!" I shooed it back with the guitar, and sketched a cross on the glass pane. Then the waving arm-streaks and the lumpy cloud of head and body were sliding back toward the table.

"Light that candle!" I hollered to the girl. "Light it!"

She heard, and she grabbed the candle up from the table. She ran across the floor, the cloud hovering after her, and then she was down on one knee, shoving the candle into the fireplace, and that quick it lighted up.

And there wasn't any smoke-shape anywhere in the room we now saw plain.

"Where did he go?" she asked me.

I looked around to see. He hadn't left by the door or the window, for I'd made my crosses there.

"He ran," I said. "Ran before us like a scared-out coward."

"But he was strong—" she started to say.

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"He was bad," I put in, not very mannerly. "Badness thinks it's strong, but it's scared — of lights and crosses, and silver."

Taking my guitar, I picked at the silver strings, and in the music I made I walked around the room, and around again, looking. For what was left of Forney Meechum must be somewhere, hiding. And we'd better find out where he hid, or he might be out at us again when we weren't ready.

I glanced in the corners, up in the rafters. Then at the shelf. Then I glanced at the shelf twice.

The old bottle that stood there, it was dark-looking, like muddy water. Or like muddy water, and in the muddy water maybe a hiding thing, like what can hide in such a place; a snake or a worse thing than a snake, waiting its time.

I didn't want her to see then, so I made up something quick.

"Look over in the corner yonder," I said to her. "Take the candle."

She moved to look, and I moved to follow her. Close against a wall, I scooped a lump of clay from the chinking, a wet gob as big as my thumb. I was within a long reach of the shelf.

"The corner," I said, pointing.

And, quick as I could make it, I jammed that clay down on top of the open bottle neck and shoved it in like a cork.

"What —" she began to say.

I picked up the bottle. It felt warm and tingly. In the candlelight we could see the thick dark boiling cloud inside, stirring and spinning and fighting every whichaway, with no way out. I took the candle and dripped wax on the clay, and in the wax I marked a cross with my thumb nail.

"Remember the Arabian Nights book?" I asked.

She shook her head. "No. It's foreign, isn't it?"

"Has a thousand and one stories," I said, "and one of them tells how a haunt was tricked in a bottle like this and sealed away forever. Forney Meechum's safe in there."

She moved with the candle and put it on the table. She pushed the chair back into place and stood behind it in her green dress, straight and tall and proud, the way I'd first seen her.

"Now he can come," she said to me, very sure. "Jeremiah."

"Jeremiah Donovant?" I bubbled out.

"Who else?" she asked. "He's coming back to me, after all these years. I felt him coming."

"Then —" I said, but I didn't have to say it. I knew who she was by now.

"I told you I wasn't all dead," reminded Lute Meechum. "Forney shot me in the heart and flung me in a grave, but I couldn't all die. I just lay there till I knew Jeremiah was heading back here for me."

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I got my coat from beside the fireplace. It felt funny to be in that cabin, with one haunt inside the bottle and one standing behind the chair.

"Thank you for everything, John," she said, old-folksy mannerly. "Thank you kindly. You can go now, it's all right."

The door squeaked open.

In out of the night came one of the wettest people you ever could call for. His shoulders and pant legs were soaked, water dripped from his white hair and his old man's chin.

"Mr. Jay," I greeted him.

"Jeremiah," Lute Meechum greeted him.

He walked across, paying me no mind. "I had to come," he said to her, and the candle went out again.

But I could see him sink down in the chair, and the light from the fireplace made his face look all of a sudden not old any more.

He put up his face, and she put hers down. He went all slack and limp. Restful.

I was outside, with the bottle and guitar. There was nary cloud in the sky, and the moon shone down like a ball of white fire.

The cabin was dark inside now, and I could see by the moon that it was a ruined wreck. The roof fallen in, the window broken, the logs rotten — you'd swear nobody had set foot there for fifty years back. But inside, Jeremiah Donovant and Lute Meechum were together at last, and peaceful. So peaceful most folks would think they were dead and gone.

On along the trail that was now so clear, I found a tree that looked hollow. Down in its dark inside I put the bottle, and left it there.

It seemed to me I ought to be shaky and scared, but I wasn't. I felt right good. That dumb supper, now — the way I'd heard it said, sometimes a dumb supper calls up things that oughtn't be there; but now I'd seen a dead haunt, setting a dumb supper to tole a living man to her. And it wasn't bad. It wasn't wrong. They were happy about it, I knew that.

Walking in the bright moonlight, I began to strum my guitar, and, gentlemen, the song I sang is really an old song:

Beauty, strength, youth, are flowers and fading seen —
Duty, faith, love, are roots and ever green. . . .

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Recommended Reading:

The Best Science-Fantasy Books of 1953

by THE EDITORS

THE IMPACT of science fiction on general trade book publishing was more marked in 1953 than in any other year since New York publishers first recognized the existence of such literature.

Six years ago science fiction simply did not exist, so far as trade publishers were concerned. There'd been a midget's handful of pioneer anthologies and the early experimental ventures of the specialized presses, and that was all. In 1949 the major houses began to discover s. f.; and in that first year's rush 38 books appeared. The impetus continued into 1950, which produced 54 books, and then leveled off, with 51 in 1951 and 52 in 1952.

With a plateau of 50-odd books per year over a three-year period, one might have thought that this indicated a fixed consumer-capacity; but abruptly, in 1953, the number of s. f. books published zoomed up to 71 — an increase of 36% over the preceding year!

These figures represent predominantly hardcover publishing; in any of these years the number of paperback originals has been insignificant (though all indications are that it will mount sharply in 1954 and years to come). In comparable fields of popular entertainment, hardcover publishing has fallen off markedly; mysteries, for instance, were down 15% from 1952 to 1953 in hardcovers, with paperback original publication rising strongly and, though we don't have such precise figures, much the same has been true of westerns.

The section of the science fiction field which accounted for most of this striking rise was the original novel — the novel which has not appeared in magazine form or which is serialized only shortly before its book publication. In the beginning, most novels were revivals of five- or ten-year-old pulp serials. There were only nine new novels in the 1949 crop, 14 in 1950, 19 in 1951, 18 in 1952 . . . and 34 in 1953 — or almost as many as in the previous two years combined! Not only the number, but the quality of new novels took an abrupt turn upward — so much so that we have at the moment no idea of how we will cast our ballot as judges of the International Fantasy Award; 1953 produced at least a half dozen novels better than the best of many a previous year.

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This 1953 expansion of science fiction in the general market was further evidenced by an unusual amount of writing *about* s. f. In book form alone appeared two full-length critical studies of the field. Neither Reginald Bretnor's symposium, MODERN SCIENCE FICTION (Coward-McCann, $3.75), nor L. Sprague de Camp's textbook for writers, SCIENCE-FICTION HANDBOOK (Hermitage, $3.50), is so definitive as, for instance, Howard Haycraft's books on the mystery novel; but both are valuable pioneer efforts.

The publication of special science fiction for teen-agers and even younger readers was somewhat more plentiful than in 1952, but largely of very poor quality, as fiction or as science. By far the best of the crop was Robert A. Heinlein's STARMAN JONES (Scribner's, $2.50), a grand tale of interstellar adventure written with such skill in scientific thinking and in character development as to recommend it equally strongly to adults. Raymond F. Jones's PLANET OF LIGHT (Winston, $2) was a worthy sequel to his 1952 story, SON OF THE STARS; and John Keir Cross's THE STOLEN SPHERE (Dutton, $2.75) combined a slight amount of s. f. with a large amount of wondrous grand-manner melodrama. For the youngest addicts, Walter R. Brooks converted his celebrated pig into an astronaut in FREDDY AND THE SPACE SHIP (Knopf, $3), with results to entrance readers of every age.

Outstanding among the year's reissues of long unavailable books was Olaf Stapledon's TO THE END OF TIME (Funk & Wagnalls, $5), superlatively edited by Basil Davenport, an enormous collection of the major works of the greatest poet-philosopher in science fiction. H. Rider Haggard's LOST CIVILIZATIONS (Dover, $3.95) made available again that perfect epic of Norse battle and magic, ERIC BRIGHTEYES, along with two worthy companions. And Edwin A. Abbott's FLATLAND (Dover, $2.25 cloth, $1 paper) remains after more than 70 years a charmingly witty satire and as mathematically valid a fiction of other dimensions as has ever been written.

Book review editors always argue about the inclusion of cartoon-collections among books; but fantasy fans have so warmly taken to their hearts the denizens of the Okefenokee Swamp that we have no hesitation in citing, among the year's best fantasy, Walt Kelly's UNCLE POGO SO-SO STORIES and THE POGO PAPERS (Simon & Schuster, $1 each). The same enthusiasts should discover, if they haven't already, Al Capp's THE WORLD OF LI'L ABNER (Ballantine, $1.50 cloth, 35¢ paper) and Jack Kent's KING AROO (Doubleday, $1).

Several of the year's non-fiction books deserve the strongest recommendation to readers and even more especially to writers of science fiction, as invaluable detailed background material: Heinz Haber's MAN IN SPACE (Bobbs-Merrill, $3.75), for the latest advances in space medicine; Patrick Moore's A GUIDE TO THE MOON (Norton, $3.95), for every conceivable fact

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about man's probable first outpost in space; the symposium CONQUEST OF THE MOON, edited by Cornelius Ryan (Viking, $4.50), for its fine survey of what we shall do on the moon once we get there; and particularly J. Bronowski's THE COMMON SENSE OF SCIENCE (Harvard, $2), for its profound (and beautifully written!) expression of the nature and method of imaginative scientific thinking. Of the year's rash of "saucer" books, which managed to be equally irrational on both sides of the controversy, you need concern yourself only with Major Donald Keyhoe's FLYING SAUCERS FROM OUTER SPACE (Holt, $3), a straightforward and seemingly incontrovertible account of why Keyhoe and a significant proportion of the Air Force are convinced of the interplanetary origin of Unidentified Flying Objects.

And now, for a list (alphabetically by author) of the best imaginative fiction of a most productive year.

Alfred Bester: THE DEMOLISHED MAN (Shasta, $3). Very possibly the best fusion of science and crime fiction to date, this headlong melodrama, with its unique puzzle of not "who" but "why," is a fine study of the inevitable conflict between man and esper-man.

Everett F. Bleiler & T. E. Dikty, editors: BEST SCIENCE-FICTION STORIES: 1953 (Fell, $3.50). As usual, better than most anthologies and especially notable this year for the presence of so many younger scribes and the absence of a number of past Great Names.

Fredric Brown: THE LIGHTS IN THE SKY ARE STARS (Dutton, $3). This heart-wrenching story of the impact of space travel on a handful of everyday people is probably the best small-scale, intimate s. f. of the year.

Arthur C. Clarke: AGAINST THE FALL OF NIGHT (Gnome, $2.75). Realist-yet-poet Clarke at his absolute best in a tale of the almost incomprehensibly remote future, when man's static civilization stirs to life again as one boy reaches out for the stars.

Arthur C. Clarke: EXPEDITION TO EARTH (Ballantine, $2 cloth, 35¢ paper). A collection of top-flight short stories by a top-flight writer, distinguished for humor, technical ideas, science fictional thinking and all-around excellence.

Groff Conklin, editor: SCIENCE-FICTION ADVENTURES IN DIMENSION (Vanguard, $2.95). The "dean" of anthologists submits an enticing collection of travels through time or to alternate universes. An extraordinary job of research.

Groff & Lucy Conklin, editors: THE SUPERNATURAL READER (Lippincott, $3.95). Husband and wife collaborate successfully to round up an amiable hodgepodge of all types of fantasy from all schools of writing.

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Guy Cullingford: POST MORTEM (Lippincott, $2.50). Precisely balanced between fantasy and crime, but we're convinced the ghost did it.

Basil Davenport, editor: TALES TO BE TOLD IN THE DARK (Dodd, Mead, $3). A keystone collection of haunting and horror.

C. M. Kornbluth: THE SYNDIC (Doubleday, $2.95). Another briskly plotted, highly enjoyable view of a Kornbluth future; one whose chief delight is, amazingly enough, the benevolent operations of a criminal aristocracy.

Fritz Leiber: THE GREEN MILLENNIUM (Abelard, $2.75). Ailurophiles and people generally bored with the "alien conquers all" theme will be vastly intrigued with this tense account of the redemption of a degenerate culture.

Ward Moore: BRING THE JUBILEE (Farrar, Straus & Young, $2, Ballantine, 35¢). As detailedly convincing an account of a world that might have been as we have yet read, this may be *the* classic novel of alternate universes.

Frederik Pohl, editor: STAR SCIENCE FICTION STORIES (Ballantine, $1.50 cloth, 35¢ paper). A collection of originals by all the "best people," unbeatable in quality *and* price.

Frederik Pohl & C. M. Kornbluth: THE SPACE MERCHANTS (Ballantine, $1.50 cloth, 35¢ paper). A nightmare wherein the account executive has become king and advertising rules the planets. High in shudder content and story value — low in optimism.

Fletcher Pratt & L. Sprague de Camp: TALES FROM GAVAGAN'S BAR (Twayne, $3). This book edition of the chronicles of curious quaffings is enriched by that which their magazine publication could not supply: illustrator Inga's revealing drawings of habitués and . . . things.

Bertrand Russell: SATAN IN THE SUBURBS (Simon & Schuster, $3). Wherein, at eighty, one of the world's great philosophers blandly tries his hand at fiction and creates some wondrous fantasies that are wholly, and most delightfully, unlike anything else ever written.

Theodore Sturgeon: MORE THAN HUMAN (Farrar, Straus & Young, $2, Ballantine, 35¢). Mmmnn, probably the *best* science fiction novel of 1953! We know . . . that's a strong statement, but this flawlessly written and plotted treatment of psycho-symbiotic mutants as protagonists of a serious, unspecialized novel makes our stand awfully plausible.

William Tenn, editor: CHILDREN OF WONDER (Simon & Schuster, $2.95). While not a few of these tales of disturbingly unique youngsters have been anthologized before, the editor's extraordinarily high literary standards make this a must for the neophyte, a most useful adjunct for the veteran.

John Wyndham: OUT OF THE DEEPS (Ballantine, cloth $2, paper 35¢). A humanly convincing account of extraterrestrials who first make themselves at home in our ocean deeps before venturing upon the lands we think ours.

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You were kind enough to express your liking for my demon Snulbug, so now we're calling up from the past another Boucher demon, Sriberdegibit. A number of you will place the gory source of the curse which Srib wields; but I wonder if any of the more profound students of demonology are familiar with the classic work in which I discovered the names of Snulbug and Sriberdegibit? — A. B.

Sriberdegibit

by ANTHONY BOUCHER

"MAY I BE eternally cursed!" Gilbert Iles gasped.

The little man with the sketchy fringe of beard made further passes, reached out into the air again, and plunked a second $20 gold piece down on the bar beside the first.

"It's beautiful," Iles announced solemnly. Hot buttered rum always made him solemn. "I've never seen such prestidigitation in my life. See: I can say 'prestidigitation.' That's what comes of having trained articulation. That's beautiful, too."

The little man smiled. "You're an actor, colleague?" he asked.

"Not officially. I'm a lawyer. I won the Shalgreen will case today; that's why I'm celebrating. Did I tell you about that case?"

"No. Was it interesting?"

"Most interesting. You see, the presumptive heirs — But the hell with that," Gilbert Iles decided with solemn capriciousness. "Show me some more prestidigitation."

The water lapped peacefully at the piles under the bar. The sailor in the corner switched off the table light and let the clear moonshine bathe the blonde opposite him. The radio was turned so low that it was only a murmur. The man with the fringe beard made a peculiarly elaborate pass and ended up with a gold piece balanced on the tip of each of his five outspread fingers.

"May I be eternally cursed!" Iles repeated. Linda objected to strong language; for some reason she permitted *cursed* while damning *damned*. "But

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gold," he added. "How does that work? Does the government let you keep all that gold because it's a professional tool? Or are they phonies?"

"I know," said the little man sadly. "Laws never make any allowance for magic. And They never make any allowance for laws. I never can convince Them that Their gold isn't any earthly use to me. Oh well—" He made another pass and said a word that seemed to have no vowels. The seven coins on the bar vanished.

"Beautiful," said Gilbert Iles. "I'd like to have you around when the prosecution brings in some unexpected exhibits. How's about another drink on that?"

"No, thank you."

"Come on. I'm celebrating, I am. I can still say 'prestidigitation' because I've got trained articulation but I'm soaring up and up and up and I want company. Just because Linda stayed home with a headache, do I have to drink alone? No!" he burst forth in thunderous oratorical tones. "Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, how can you sit there unmoved and behold this rank injustice practised before your very eyes? Hearts of the hardest stone would melt, thaw and resolve themselves into a dew before —"

His rounded periods drowned out the radio and the lapping of the waves. The sailor looked around, puzzled and belligerent.

"I'm sorry," said the little man. "But I shouldn't ever take more than one. I take two, and things begin to happen. I remember that night in Darjeeling —"

"So —" Gilbert Iles's voice took on the tone of a hectoring cross-examiner. "You remember that? And what else do you remember? Do you remember the pitiful state of this defendant here, parched, insatiate, and driven by your cruelty to take refuge in the vice of solitary drinking? Do you remember —"

The sailor was getting up from his table. The bartender sidled up to the fringe-bearded man. "Look, Mac, if he wants to buy you a drink, O.K., so let him buy it."

"But, colleague, if things happen —"

The bartender glanced apprehensively at the sailor. "Things are going to happen right now if you don't shut him up. Well, gents," he added in louder tones, "what'll it be?"

"Gin and tonic," said the little man resignedly.

"Hot ruttered bum," Gilbert Iles announced. He heard his own words in the air. "I did that on purpose," he added hastily.

The other nodded agreeably.

"What's your name?" Iles asked.

"Ozymandias the Great," the prestidigitator said.

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"Aha! Show business, huh? You're a magician?"

"I was."

"Mm-m-m. I see. Death of vaudeville and stuff?"

"Not just that. The trouble was mostly the theater managers. They kept getting worried."

"Why?"

"They get scared when it's real. They don't like magic unless they know just where the mirrors are. When you tell them there aren't any mirrors — well, half of them don't believe you. The other half tear up the contract."

The drinks came. Gilbert Iles paid for them and sipped his rum while he did an exceedingly slow take. Then, "Real!" he echoed. "No mirrors — May I be —"

"Of course there was some foundation for their worry," Ozymandias went on calmly. "The Darjeeling episode got around. And then there was the time the seal trainer talked me into a second gin and tonic and I decided to try that old spell for calling up a salamander. We wanted to see could we train it to play 'The Star Spangled Banner'; it would have been a socko finale. The fire department got there in time and there was only about a thousand dollars' damage, but after that people kept worrying about me."

"You mean, you are a magician?"

"I said so, didn't I?"

"But a magician — When you said you were a magician, I thought you just meant you were a magician. I didn't dream you meant you were a *magician*."

"Only a white one," said Ozymandias deprecatingly.

"Then those coins — They came from —"

"I don't know just where they come from. You reach out with the proper technique and They give them to you."

"And who are They?"

"Oh — things — you know, colleague."

"I," Gilbert Iles announced, "am drunk. What else can you do?"

"Oh, any little odd jobs. Call spirits from the vasty deep, that kind of thing. Work minor spells. Once" — he smiled — "I taught a man how to be a werewolf of good will. And then" — his round face darkened — "there was that time in Darjeeling —"

"What could you do now to help me celebrate? Could you cure Linda's headache?"

"Not at a distance. Not unless you had something personal of hers — handkerchief, lock of hair? No? The falling off of sentimentality does play the devil with sympathetic magic. You want to celebrate? I could call up a couple of houris I know — nice girls, if a trifle plump — and we —"

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Iles shook his head. "No Linda, no houris. I, sir, have a monogamous soul. Monogamous body too, practically."

"Do you like music?"

"Not very."

"Too bad. There's a first-rate spirit band that plays the cornet, flute, harp, sackbut, psaltery, dulcimer, and all kinds of music. Let's see; we could —" He snapped his fingers. "Look, you're Taurus, aren't you?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"You were born in May?"

"Yes."

"Thought so. Something about your aura. Well, how would you like to have a wish granted?"

"Which wish?" said Gilbert Iles. It was not an easy phrase even for trained articulation.

"Any wish. But think it over carefully first. Remember the story about the sausages. Or the monkey's paw. But for the next minute or two you can have any wish granted."

"Why?"

Ozymandias reached into the air and plucked a lighted cigaret. "Be deciding on your wish, because there isn't too much time. Wimps are flighty creatures. And while you're thinking, I'll give you a rough sketch. You see, there's a Taurine wimp in the room."

"A which?"

"A wimp — a wish-imp. You see, if the universe ran strictly according to coherent laws, it would be unchanging. This would be equally dull for God and for man. So there has to be chance and intervention. For instance, there are miracles. But those are important and don't happen every day. So there's the chance element that every man can, quite unconsciously, perform miracles. Haven't you sometimes had the most unlikely wish work out, contrary to all expectations?"

"Once in a thousand times."

"That's about the odds; more would produce chaos. Well, that was because there was a Taurine wimp around. The wimps aren't many; but they constantly wander about among men. When one of them overhears a wish made by a man under his sign, he grants it."

"And it works?"

"It works. If I had only run onto a Sagittarian wimp in Darjeeling —"

Gilbert Iles goggled, and took a long swig of buttered rum. "May I," he said solemnly, "be eternally cursed!"

Ozymandias gasped. "Good heavens! I certainly never expected you to pick a wish like that!"

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That slight joggling of the air was the Taurine wimp giggling. It was always delighted by the astonishing involuntary wishes of people. As Puck was forever saying, "What fools these mortals be!" It giggled again and soared away.

Gilbert Iles gulped the rest of his rum. "You mean that . . . that exclamation counted as a wish?"

"It was phrased as one, wasn't it, colleague? May I be — That's the way you make wishes."

"And I am —" Without the buttered rums, the solid legal mind of Iles would have hooted at such a notion; but now it seemed to have an ominous plausibility. "Then I am cursed?"

"I'm afraid so."

"But how? Does it mean that when I die I'll —"

"Oh no. Cursed, not damned. A curse affects you in this life."

"But how?" Iles insisted.

"Should I know? You didn't specify. The wimp probably turned you over to the nearest demon. There's no telling what his specialty is."

"No telling? But you . . . you said you could call spirits from the vasty deep. Can't you call demons and find out about curses?"

"Hm-m-m." Ozymandias hesitated. "I could maybe. But if I made the least mistake and got the wrong kind of demon — Or if — It might even be a curse you'd sooner not know about."

Iles shook his head. "I want to know. A smart lawyer can handle anything. I don't know why curses and demons shouldn't be included."

Ozymandias drained his gin and tonic. "On your own head be it," he said. "Come on."

A mile up the beach you were in a primitive world. There was no light but the moon and no sound but the waves. You were restored to the condition of your first tailless forefather. There was no sign of civilization, only the awesome vastness of nature and its forces. Also you had sand in your shoes and it worried you.

The fringe-bearded little magician had built a pyre of driftwood and sprinkled on it a couple of powders from a case of phials in his pocket. Iles struck a match for him, but it snapped in two. Ozymandias said, "Never mind," and made a pass or two. The driftwood caught fire and burned with the flame of seven colors. Ozymandias said an incantation — not in the ringing and dramatic tones that Iles had expected, but with the casual mutter of any celebrant going through a familiar ritual. The flame leaped high. And the moon went out.

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More precisely, they seemed to be cut off from its rays. They were in a globe of darkness at the core of which glowed the suddenly dying fire. And in that glow sat the demon.

He was of no particular height. It may have been the flicker of the dying flames; it may have been some peculiarity of his own. He kept varying from an apparent height of about two feet to around seven or eight. His shape was not too unlike that of a human being, save of course for the silver-scaled tail. His nails had the sheen of a beetle's carapace. One tusk seemed loose and he had a nervous habit of twanging it. The sound was plaintive.

"Your name?" Ozymandias demanded politely.

"Sriberdegibit." The voice was of average human pitch, but it had an unending resonance, like a voice bouncing about in a cave.

"You are a curse-demon?"

"Sure." The demon espied Iles with happy recognition. "Hi!" he said.

"Hi!" said Gilbert Iles feebly. He was very sober now; he felt regretfully sure of that. And he was soberly seeing a curse-demon, which meant that he was soberly cursed. And he did not even know what the curse was. "Ask him quick," he prodded the magician.

"You have put a curse on my friend here?"

"He asked for it, didn't he?" He looked bored, and twanged his tusk.

"And what is the nature of that curse?"

"He'll find out."

"I command you to tell us."

"Nuts. That's not in my duties."

Ozymandias made a pass. "I command you —"

The demon jumped and rubbed his rump. "That's a fine thing to do!" he said bitterly.

"Want some more?"

"All right. I'll tell you." He paused and twanged. "It was just a plain old curse. Just something we've had lying around since the Murgatroyd family died out. I just took the first one I came to; he didn't seem to care."

"And it was —"

"The curse the witches used to use on their too virtuous puritan persecutors, remember? It's a nice one. In poetry, too. It goes like this." He twanged his tusk again to get the proper pitch, and then chanted:

"Commit an evil deed each day thou must
Or let thy body crumble into dust.

"Of course," he added, "it doesn't really crumble. That's for the rhyme."

"I've heard of that curse," Ozymandias said thoughtfully. "It's a tricky one in terminology. How have the Upper Courts adjudicated 'evil deed'?"

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"Synonymous with sin," said Sriberdegibit.

"Hm-m-m. He must commit a sin each day — 'day' meaning?"

"Twelve oh one a.m. till the next midnight starting tomorrow morning."

"He must commit a sin each day or else —"

"Or else," said the demon, with a little more cheerfulness than he had heretofore displayed, "I show up at midnight and strangle him." He coiled his tail into a garroting noose.

"Then you must be always near him to observe his actions and to carry out your duty if he fails. Very well. I lay this further behest upon you: Whenever he says your name, you must appear to him and answer his questions. Now begone!"

"Hey!" the demon protested. "I don't have to do that. It's not in my instructions. I — Yi!" He jumped again and rubbed his rump even more vigorously. "All right. You win."

"Begone!" Ozymandias repeated.

The moon shone bright and clear on the beach and on the embers of a driftwood fire. "Well," said the magician, "now you know."

Gilbert Iles shook himself. Then he pinched himself. Then he said, "I guess I really saw that."

"Of course. And now you know the nature of the curse. What do you think of it, colleague?"

Iles laughed. "I can't say it worries me. It's a cinch. A sin a day — I'm no angel. It'll take care of itself."

Ozymandias frowned and stared at the embers. "I'm glad you think so," he said slowly.

Gilbert Iles was always hard to wake up. He was especially so the next morning; but when he did finally open his eyes, he found the sight of Linda in a powder-blue housecoat a quite sufficient reward for the effort.

"My headache's all gone," she announced cheerfully. "And how is yours?"

He felt of his head and shook it experimentally. "Not a trace of a hangover. That's funny —"

"Funny? You really did celebrate then? What did you do?"

"I went down to the beach and rode on things and then I went to a bar and got talking to a" — he paused and blinked incredulously in a rush of memory — "to an old vaudeville magician. He showed me some funny tricks," he concluded lamely.

"I'm glad you had a good time. And when you next win such a nice fat fee, I promise I won't have a headache. I hope. Now come on; even the man that won the Shalgreen case has to get to the office."

A shower, then coffee and tomato juice made the world perfectly sane

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and plausible again. Tusked demons and tomato juice could simply not be part of the same world patterns. Neither could daily-sin curses and Linda. All Gilbert Iles's legalistic rationalism reasserted itself.

Taurine wimps — never phrase an unintended wish; it may be granted — silver-scaled tails that garrot at midnight — this was the damnedest drunken fantasy that the mind had ever framed.

Gilbert Iles shrugged blithely and whistled while he shaved. He broke off when he realized that he was whistling that tuneless chant to which the — imaginary, of course — demon had intoned the rimed curse.

He went through a perfectly normal and unperturbed day, with enough hard work to banish all thought of demons and wimps. An unexpected complication had arisen in the Chasuble murder case. The sweet old lady — such ideal jury bait — who was to appear as a surprise witness to Rolfe's alibi suddenly announced that she wanted two thousand dollars or she'd tell the truth.

This came as a shock both to Iles and to his partner Tom Andrews. They'd taken the witness in good faith and built the whole defense around her. This sudden unmasking meant first a long conference on whether they could possibly get along without her — they couldn't — then a guarded and difficult conversation with Rolfe in jail, and finally an afternoon of trying to raise the two thousand before her deadline at sunset.

Then Linda met him downtown for dinner and a movie, and they danced a bit afterward to make up for the celebration that the headache had marred. They even played the game of remember-before-we-were-married, and parked on a hilltop near home for a half-hour.

It was almost twelve thirty when they got home. It was one by the time Iles had conclusively said good night to his wife and retired to the study for a final check-over of the testimony of the prosecution witnesses at the preliminary hearing.

There, alone in that quiet pine-paneled room, he thought of the wish and the curse for the first time since his morning shave. It was now over an hour past midnight. All day long he had been too busy to devote an instant to sin. And his neck was still eminently unstrangled. He smiled, trying to figure out what curious combination of subconscious memories could have produced such a drunken nightmare. Creative imagination, that's what he had.

Then, just as a final touch of direct evidence, he said, "Sriberdegibit!"

The demon sat cross-legged on the desk, his height fluctuating and the plaintive twang of his tusk ringing through the room.

Gilbert Iles sat speechless. "Well?" the demon said at last.

"Well —" said Gilbert Iles.

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"You summoned me. What goes?"

"I — You — I — You're real?"

"Look," Sriberdegibit expostulated. "Am I real? That's a fine thing to call me up to ask. Am I a philosopher? Are you real? Is the universe real? How should I know these things?"

Iles eyed the silver tail somewhat apprehensively. "But — it's way past midnight now."

"So what? Why should I bother materializing unless you summon me or unless I have to finish you off?"

"And you don't have to?"

"Why should I? You did your daily sin all right."

Iles frowned. "When?"

"You arranged to suborn a witness, didn't you?"

"But that . . . that's all in the day's work."

"Is it? Didn't something hurt a little inside when you decided to do it? Didn't you use to say to yourself when you were young that you weren't going to be that kind of a lawyer, oh no? Didn't you sin against yourself when you did that?"

Gilbert Iles said nothing.

"Can I go now?" Sriberdegibit demanded.

"You can go."

The demon vanished. Iles sat in his study a long time that night, staring at the desk but not seeing the transcript.

"Tom, about Rolfe's phony witness, I'm not sure we ought to use her."

"Not use her? But the whole case'll blow up without her."

"Not necessarily. I think we're overreaching ourselves anyway with a plea of not guilty. If we lose out, it'll mean the gas chamber for him. But if we change the plea to guilty in a lesser degree, we can maybe get him off with five or ten years."

"And after we've paid out two thousand?"

"Rolfe paid that. And he can afford to."

"Nuts, Gil. You're not going ethical on me, are you?"

"Hardly. But it's not safe. She can't be trusted. She might go on strike for more yet. She might even sell out to the prosecution and arrange to break down on her cross-examination. She could blackmail us by threatening to confess to the Bar Association."

"Maybe you're right at that. When you put it that way — Here, let's have a snort on it. What else do you know?"

"Nothing much. Oh, I did piek up a choice little item on Judge Shackford. Do you know that in the privacy of his chambers —"

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Gilbert Iles felt the cool balm of relief. He wasn't becoming one of these prigs who prate about ethics. God, no. But it was one thing to sin casually against yourself, and quite another to be reminded of it — to know consciously that you had sinned and thereby saved your neck.

Talking Rolfe into the change of plea was another matter. It was only accomplished after Iles had built an exceedingly vivid picture of the dear sweet old lady selling out on the witness stand and delivering Rolfe straight to the Death Row. Then there were officers to see and papers to file and the whole new strategy of defense to go over minutely with Tom Andrews.

He phoned Linda that he wouldn't be home, dined on sandwiches and spiked coffee in the office, and finally got home at 11, too tired to do more than hang up his clothes, brush his teeth, and bestow one half-conscious kiss on his wife before his eyes closed.

He woke up the next morning feeling badly puzzled, and wondered what he was puzzled about. It wasn't until about 10:30, in the midst of a conference with a client, that the worry struck him clearly. He hadn't had time to do a thing yesterday except the surely quite unsinful business of abandoning the perjured witness. And yet no silvery tail had coiled about his throat at midnight.

He got rid of the client as soon as he decently could. Then, alone in his office, he cleared his throat and said, "Sriberdegibit!"

The wavering outline of the demon sat tailor-wise on his desk and said, "Hi!"

"You," said Gilbert Iles, "are a fake. You and your curse and your tail. Poo, sir, to you!"

Sriberdegibit twanged at his tusk. His tail twitched hungrily. "You don't believe I'm really going to attend to you? Ha!"

"I certainly don't. The whole thing's a fraud. I didn't have time yesterday to work in a single sin. And here I am, safe and sound."

"You just underrate yourself," said the demon not unkindly. "Remember spreading scandal about Judge Shackford? That's getting around nicely, and it's going to cost him the next election. That'll do for one day."

"Oh. I hadn't thought of it as — Oh — But look, Srib. We've got to get this clear. What constitutes —" He broke off and answered the buzzer.

It was Miss Krumpig. "Mr. Andrews wants you to go over the brief on appeal in the Irving case. Shall I bring it in now, or do you have a conference? I thought I heard voices."

"Bring it in. I was just . . . ah . . . just rehearsing a speech." He clicked off.

"Well now," said Sriberdegibit. "As to what constitutes —"

"Begone," Iles interrupted hastily as the door opened.

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Miss Krumpig listened and frowned as she entered. "That's a funny noise. Sort of a plaintive twanging like. It's dying away now —"

She put the rough draft of the brief on his desk. As usual, she leaned over more and nearer than there was any good reason to. She had changed to a subtler scent and had discovered a blouse with the maximum combination of respectability and visibility.

Anyone employing Miss Krumpig should have had no trouble at all in contriving a sin a day.

"Will that be all now, Mr. Iles?"

He thought of Linda and the curse of a monogamous temperament. "No," he said firmly. "I'll think of something else." Miss Krumpig left the room trying to figure that one out.

For a week the curse took care of itself, with very little help from Gilbert Iles. He thought of a few sins for himself; but it is not easy to sin when your love for your wife and your newly stimulated professional conscience block the two simplest avenues. Saturday night he did manage to cheat undetected in the usual poker game and wound up with 31 ill-gotten dollars — which once the deadline was passed he proceeded to spend on a magnificent binge for the bunch of them. Another night he visited a curious dive that he had often heard rumors of, something in the nature of the more infamous spots for tourists in Havana. It was the one way of committing a sensual sin without infidelity to Linda. It was also a painful bore.

The other days, the days when he was too busy or too uninventive to achieve what he thought a sin, turned out all right, too. Like the day when the girl in the restaurant gave him change for a ten out of his five. He noticed the mistake and accepted the money as a gift from the gods, thinking nothing more of it. But Sriberdegibit was sinfully delighted when the girl had to make up the difference, couldn't do it, and lost her job.

Then there was the pedestrian that he playfully scared, causing a heart attack. There was the boon companion whom he encouraged in a night's carousing, knowing subconsciously that it meant starvation rations for his children. There was the perfectly casual lie with which he got out of jury duty — a sin, Sriberdegibit explained, against the State as representing his fellow man.

But these episodes all had their effect, and that effect was, for a cursed man, an awkward one. Gilbert Iles was as careless and selfish as the next man, but he was not constituted to do ill willfully. After the Judge Shackford business, he was rather careful as to the scandalous rumors which he spread. He drove carefully, he revised his statement on jury duty, he developed a certain petty financial scrupulousness.

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And one midnight, driving home alone from an evening's business-sociability with a client, he felt cold scales coil about his throat.

Gilbert Iles did not have the stuff of a good sinner. His first reaction was to pull the car up to the curb; an automobile guided by a strangled corpse would be a frightful danger at large. And as he did so he managed with choking breath to gulp, "Sriberdegibit!"

The elastic shape of the demon wavered on the steering wheel as the car stopped. Iles tried to shift away from it in the cabined limits of the coupé, but the silver tail held him fast. "Must talk!" he gasped. "One minute!"

Sriberdegibit hesitated, then let his tail relax ever so slightly. "O.K.," he said. "I was starting in a minute earlier to make it slow and comfortable. I can do it faster right at midnight, but you won't like it."

"Comfortable!" Iles grunted. His hand slipped beneath the scaly coils and massaged his aching neck. "But listen." He was thinking faster than he had ever thought in front of a jury. "Our agreement — invalid under laws of this country — contract involving murder non-enforceable as contrary to general welfare."

Sriberdegibit laughed and the tail twitched tighter. There was nothing plaintive or grotesque about him now. This was his moment; and he was terrible in his functional efficiency. "I'm not subject to the laws of this country, mortal. Our contract is by the laws of my kingdom!"

Iles sighed relief, as best he could sigh under the circumstances. "Then you can't strangle me for another hour."

"And why?"

"Contract under your kingdom . . . you admit . . . midnight now but only by daylight saving . . . laws of this country . . . . to your kingdom it is only 11 o'clock."

Slowly the tail relaxed. "I would," said Sriberdegibit mournfully, "draw a lawyer. But you'd better get busy before midnight."

Gilbert Iles frowned. Then he started up the car. "Down here on the boulevard there's a blind cripple sells newspapers. Works all night — I've often noticed him there. If I —"

"Now," said the demon, "you're getting the swing of it."

Gilbert Iles waited until a late streetcar had picked up the little herd of people waiting by the cripple. Then he started across the street, but his feet would not guide him to the blind vender. They took him first into a bar. He had three rapid drinks, his eyes fixed on the clock whose hands moved steadily from 12 toward 1.

"Don't let the time get you, Mac," the barkeep said consolingly after the third. "It ain't closing time till 2. You got all the time in the world."

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"It's closing time at one," said Iles tautly, and felt his gullet tighten up at the memory of those scaly coils.

"You look kind of worried. Need some company?" This was from a girl with a red dress and a bad bleach. "Well, I do," she went on when he didn't answer. "You'll buy me a drink, won't you? Sure you will. The usual, Joe."

The hands went steadily around. The drinks came regularly. The girl moved her stool closer, and the red skirt glowed warm against his thigh. This would be such a simple way. The choice was clear: To sin against a total stranger who would suffer deeply from it, or to sin against your wife who would never know it. The problem was simple, but Gilbert Iles knew the answer before he even considered it. He rose at last from his stool.

"It's almost midnight," he said. "Closing time."

The barkeep and the girl in red stared after his lurching exit, and then stared wonderingly at each other. "You're slipping, Verne," said the barkeep.

"This time," said Verne, "I'll have a *drink*."

Gilbert Iles reached the corner. Another streetcar load was just leaving. Behind them they left the empty corner and the blind cripple. He sat on the sidewalk, his legs crumpled under him at implausible angles. His head with its black glasses moved slightly at each sound. Everything about him was very clear to Gilbert Iles. He could see that his left thumbnail was cracked, that he had a hairy mole high on his right cheekbone, that there was exactly $2.37 in the cash box.

Iles shut his own eyes as he grabbed the cash box. He couldn't have said why, unless it was from some unconscious desire to even the odds between himself and his adversary.

Self-blinded, he seized the box. It was a low, foul, damnable act, and he was doing it to save his neck. Neither his closed eyes nor his many whiskies could blind him to the baseness of the act. Sin is not fun.

And as he grabbed he felt a choking grip on his neck.

His mind whirled. He couldn't be wrong. He had five minutes to spare. And this was certainly a — And then he realized that the grip was not of scales but of finger and thumb.

He opened his eyes. The vender towered over him. The dark glasses were gone, and the legs uncoiled from their double-jointed posture. The face with the hairy mole was transfigured by righteous wrath and the hand with the broken thumbnail was balled into a fist driving straight at Iles's face. It connected beautifully.

"You low scum of a rat!" the vender murmured. "Rob a blind man, will you?" *Thud*. "Steal a cripple's earnings, will you?" *Wham*. "Take advantage of a man's helplessness, will you?" *Crash*.

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The accurate legal mind of Gilbert Iles gave one last flicker. "But you're not a —"

"You thought I was, didn't you?"

Guilt and the whiskies combined to rob Iles of any power to fight back. When it was over, his puffed lips formulated one question. "Whaddime-izzit?"

The vender deciphered it and looked at a concealed watch. "One ten."

"Thanks, brother," Iles groaned. The sodden pulp of his face managed to smile.

"Sriberdegibit!" he said when he was back in the car.

"I'm still here," said the voice that bounced through invisible caves. "You didn't dismiss me."

"Sorry. Can't see so good. My eyes . . . they swell — But it's after even your midnight, and I didn't manage to —"

The demon repeated the vender's own argument. "After all," he said consolingly, "you meant ill."

"And what," Linda demanded, "were you celebrating last night?"

Gilbert Iles rolled over in bed, sat up, and opened his eyes. Or rather he tried to open them. Through puffy slits he could barely see his wife and beside her the clock which said 1:30.

He gave a groan and started to jump out of bed. When he moved his muscles, the groan redoubled and he sank back on his pillow.

"You *are* in a state," said Linda. There was sympathy under the tartness of her voice.

"The time," Iles muttered. "The office — Tom —"

"Tom phoned about eleven. I told him you were laid up with a bad cold."

"But I ought to —"

"I thought you'd better sleep it off. And you're not going to any office today looking the way you do. I'd bring you a mirror to prove it, only it's no sight to greet a man before breakfast. But what was all the celebrating for? And I didn't have a headache last night."

"You see, dear —" Iles tried to articulate between swollen lips.

Linda smiled. "Don't try, darling. Sorry I asked. Tell me after breakfast — or never, if you don't want to. Everything'll be ready as soon as you are."

Every perfect wife is a perfect diagnostician. For this breakfast Linda had prescribed soft-boiled eggs, tomato juice, a very full pot of black coffee, the morning paper — in its virginal and unrumpled state — and solitude. She served his food but did not speak to him or come near him again.

After the fifth cup of coffee and the third cigaret, Gilbert Iles went in

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search of his wife. He found her on the sun porch watering the ferns. She wore a bright printed jumper and the sun was alive in her hair.

"Linda —" he said.

"Yes, darling?" She scooped a magazine off the most comfortable chair and helped him as his creaking legs eased into it.

"I've got something to tell you, Linda."

She went on watering the ferns, but her hand trembled enough to scatter a few drops wide of their mark. "What is it? A new case?"

"No, it's — There's something about me you'll have to know, dear."

"How long is it? Three and a half years? And there's something I still don't know?"

"I'm afraid there is."

"Bad?"

"Bad."

"Worse than smoking in the bathroom?"

He laughed, but it hurt his mouth. "A little. You see, Linda, I . . . I'm living under a curse."

Water splashed on the floor. Then Linda forced herself to set the can down very steadily, take a cloth, and mop up the mess. Not till she had finished did she say, very lightly, "That's a fine thing to say. Here I wear my fingers to the bone slaving to make a nice home for you —"

"You know that's not what I mean."

"I know. It's just that — Well, it's a funny way of putting it. Tell me what's the matter."

"It isn't anything to do with you —"

Linda went over to the chair and put her arm around his shoulder. "Isn't it just?" she demanded fiercely. "Whenever there's something the matter with you, Gilbert Iles, it is something to do with me. You're me; don't you understand that?"

"My curse isn't your curse. You see, Linda, it's . . . I know it's hard to believe, but . . . well, I have to commit a sin every day."

Linda stared at him. Her face expressed a sort of grave average between laughter and tears. "You mean — Oh, darling, do you mean I'm not enough for you?"

He took her hand. "Nonsense. You're all I ever want."

"Then is it . . . I know you've been drinking a lot lately, but I thought . . . you don't mean it's . . . got hold of you, do you?"

"It isn't that. It isn't any particular kind of sin. It's just a sin. You see, I told you. It's a curse."

Linda regarded him seriously. "You did drink all that tomato juice and coffee, didn't you?"

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"Yes."

"Then I think you'd better tell me all about this from the beginning." She slid comfortably onto his lap and kept her ear close to his aching lips.

"It started," he began, "that night I was celebrating the Shalgreen case. It happened I met a —"

"But that's awful," she said when he had finished. "That's terrible. To think that all sorts of silly little wishes might be granted, do get granted — Oh my! The things I wished when I was in high school — I'll have to be careful."

"Then you do believe me?"

"Of course."

"I hardly dared expect — That's why I didn't tell you before. It's so fantastic."

"But you told me," she said simply, and leaned over to kiss him. "No, I'd hurt your poor lips."

"But what am I going to do? I can't go on like this. For one thing I never know what's going to count as a sin or not. But what's worse, I . . . I'm afraid I don't like to sin. Not when I know it, not when I think: This is sinning. You have to be a special kind of person for that; and I'm not. What are we going to do?"

"Mm-m-m," said Linda thoughtfully. "I know one thing. I'm going to keep wishing your curse'll be lifted and maybe sometime there'll be one of my wimps around."

"One chance in a thousand, the little man said."

"And then . . ." Linda hesitated. "There *is* another way."

"That my brilliant legal mind has been overlooking?"

"I don't think you've exactly been overlooking it; but maybe on my account . . . I don't know quite how to say this, Gil; but if there's one kind of sin you could do easier than another — maybe even one kind that would be sort of fun and you could save yourself that way . . . I mean, after all it *is* what people usually mean when they say 'sin,' isn't it, and you shouldn't let me stand in the way of —"

"Linda darling, are you trying to suggest . . . ?"

She gathered her breath. "I'd sooner share you with that Miss Krumpig than not have you at all," she blurted out, almost as one word. "There. I said it."

"I couldn't," he said flatly and honestly.

Her fingers lifted a kiss gently from her mouth to his swollen lips. "I'm glad. Because," she said with equal honesty, "I'm not quite sure if I really meant that or not. But I have one more idea."

"Yes?"

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"Get out the car. We're going down to the beach and find your fringe-bearded magician and fight magic with magic."

The bartender at the beach said, "Naw, he ain't been around here since that night you was with him, and that's O.K. with me. Every time he'd grab him a cigaret out of the air, some drunk'd get to thinking that was some screwy gadget we had here and get sorer'n hell 'cause he couldn't grab 'em, too. Tell me, mister: How did he work that trick?"

"He was a magician," said Gilbert Iles. "Do you know where he lived?"

"Seems to me it was down the beach a ways at the Mar Vista. Have another round?"

"No, thanks. Drink up, darling."

The clerk at the Mar Vista said, "Little man with a fringe beard? He was registered under the name O. Z. Manders. Left here about ten days ago."

"Leave any forwarding address?"

"No. He left in quite a hurry. Got a cablegram, and *whoosh!* he was gone."

"A cablegram? You don't know what —"

"I just noticed it was from Darjeeling. That's in India, isn't it?"

The clerk at the travel office said, "Little man with a funny beard? Yes, he was here. I explained to him that in times like these you couldn't guarantee any kind of rush accommodations for travel — he'd have to take his chances. So he got mad and went away."

"Thanks." Gilbert Iles started to leave, but Linda held him back.

"I beg your pardon," she said, "but how did he go away?"

The clerk stammered. "I . . . I don't know. How should I?"

"Please. We understand. Did he just vanish — *pouf!* — with smoke and stuff?"

The clerk said, "I am not a drinking man. But you seem sympathetic, madam. I assure you that he took a handkerchief out of his breast pocket and spread it on the floor, where it grew to the proportions of a carpet. Then he said some strange word and I swear that I saw the handkerchief fly out the door with him on it. But if you ever mention that to my employers —"

"So that's that," Linda observed. "You said your little man kept talking about Darjeeling, and now he's had to go back there. We can't get any help from him."

"I hope," said Gilbert Iles, "he isn't too much of a problem to the coastal

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antiaircraft batteries. What would happen to a spotter who reported a magic carpet? But now what can we do?"

Linda held her head high and resolute. "We're going to call up your demon and talk this over with him. If my husband has to commit a sin a day, I want to know just what kind of sins."

They drove for miles up and down the beach. It is not easy in full daylight to find a suitably quiet spot for calling up demons.

"People," Linda sighed at last. "They swarm —"

"Shall we go home?"

"But it's so nice here at the beach — I'm so glad to have a day off with you even if you have to be cursed and beaten to make it. I know! We can call him up in a hotel."

They drove back to the Mar Vista. There was something appropriate in calling up a demon in the magician's former home. The clerk was puzzled by their return and looked suspiciously at Iles's battered face.

"I'll bet," Linda whispered, "he thinks I got this wedding ring at the five-and-dime. I hope."

When they were alone in the drab and scantily furnished room, Gilbert Iles said: "Sriberdegibit!"

The fluctuant form perched itself on the dresser.

Linda gave a little gasp. Iles took her hand. "Afraid, dear?"

"Heavens, no!" Her voice tried valiantly not to shake. "He . . . he's different sizes all over, isn't he?"

"In my kingdom," said the demon, "everything is in an eternal state of flux. It's only mortals who have fixed flesh; it must be very dull."

"I like it," Linda protested. "How could you buy stockings if your legs — But then you don't wear any, do you? Or anything —" She snuggled close to her husband. "See? I can talk back to him." But her voice was on the verge of sobs.

"What is it now?" said Sriberdegibit mournfully. "Did you summon me just to show me to this female?"

Iles settled his wife onto the bed and stood facing the demon as he might have confronted a hostile witness. "I want to know what is a sin?"

"Why bother?" *Twang.* "You're doing all right."

"But I don't like it and I'm not going to take it much longer. Man's a free agent. That's what makes him Man."

"Ha," said Sriberdegibit.

"I warn you, I'm going to break this curse as soon as I can. And in the meantime, I want to know just what I'm up against. What is a sin?"

"Well, you see," said the demon, "that all depends on what you believe. A sin is an offense against yourself, your God, or your fellow man."

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"Then blasphemy is a sin?" Iles grinned and let loose a five-minute tirade. Linda covered her head with a pillow. Even the demon blinked once or twice.

"There." Iles brushed the palms of his hands together. "That should do for today."

Sriberdegibit's tail twitched. "But you don't believe in God, do you?"

"Why, I conceive of —"

"Don't bluff now, dear," said Linda. "We've got to know things. And you know you don't really."

"No. I admit I don't."

"Then how," the demon asked plausibly, "can you possibly blaspheme? No, that kind of sin is out for you. So is sacrilege. You've got to believe, consciously or subconsciously, that what you do is a sin."

"Just a minute," Iles objected. "How about these egocentrics who think whatever they do must be right? Can't they ever sin?"

"They know all right. Down underneath. But this atheism makes you hard to find sins for. Now if you were a Catholic, you'd have it easy every Friday; you'd just eat meat. Or if you were a Jew, you could eat pork every day and let it go at that. But for you atheists —"

"Hold on. Isn't atheism itself a sin?"

"Not if it's honest and if it lets other people alone. If a man comes to the knowledge of God and then denies Him; or if he denies the right of other people to believe in Him — How about that? Want to start some religious persecution? That's a good one."

"I — Damn it, I couldn't do that."

"Well, let's see. You can't sin against your God. You can sin against yourself or against your fellow man. That leaves you lots of scope: abduction, adultery, arson, barratry, bigamy, burglary —"

"That's a start. Adultery and bigamy are out."

"If you really —" Linda tried to say.

"Out, I said. Barratry might do."

"What's that? It sounds dreadful."

"Inciting unnecessary litigation. Very bad legal ethics. But this demon, hang it all, has gone and aroused my professional conscience. I don't know — Burglary —"

"What was the first?" Linda demanded of the demon.

Sriberdegibit was beginning to look bored with the whole thing. "Abduction." *Twang.*

"Abduction! That's it. You could do that, couldn't you?"

"Abduction? But what would I do with what I abducted?"

"That doesn't matter. Just abduct."

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"But it's a serious infringement of the rights of the individual. I don't know that I could —"

"Gil darling, don't be a prig! Think what'll become of me if he . . . if that tail — Please, dear. You can do a little thing like that for me, can't you?"

No man can resist a pleading wife. "Very well," said Gilbert Iles. "I'll abduct for you."

"Is that all?" said Sriberdegibit wearily.

"I think so, unless —" Suddenly Iles whirled, in the manner of one tearing away the last shreds of a witness' mask of hypocrisy. "Breaking an oath would be a sin, wouldn't it? Even for an atheist?"

"Atheists don't make oaths. They affirm."

"Then breaking an affirmation?"

"I guess so."

"Very well." Iles raised his right hand. "I hereby solemnly affirm that I shall commit a sin every day of my life." He dropped his hand to point straight at the demon. "Now every day that passes without a sin I will have broken my solemn affirmation."

"Gilbert!" Linda gasped. "You're wonderful."

Sriberdegibit shook his head. "Uh-uh. It's like what you said about contracts. Unenforceable because contrary to good ends. That's a vow more honored in the breach than the observance. No go. Can I go now? Thanks."

Iles stared at the empty dresser. "Demons," he murmured, "are amazing. I never heard that quotation correctly used by a mortal. Do you suppose that Shakespeare — But I hope not."

"It was a brilliant try," said Linda consolingly.

"And now I start on a career of abduction —"

"Uh-huh. First we'll go ride on the merry-go-round and then you take me to dinner at a nice fish place and then home, then you go out and abduct."

"It's early for dinner," Iles said. "Even a little early for merry-go-rounds."

"It never is," Linda asserted.

"But as long as we have us a hotel room and the room clerk did give us that look . . ."

Linda laughed. "And you all tattered and torn, poor darling! Why, you're just like a private eye!"

"Only," she said later, "they never get three and a half years' practise, do they? Poor things . . ."

Gilbert Iles kissed his wife good night and watched her go into the house. It had been a perfect day. Aside from interviewing a tusk-twanging demon,

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it had been an ideal, quiet, happy, marital day at the beach. He sighed, started up the car, and set off on an abduction prowl.

There was no use trying anything until night had really fallen. Meanwhile he drove around at random, surveying people. Casing the job, as a client had once called it. The ideal victim for an abduction should be alone and helpless. If not helpless, certainly not capable of battering Iles's picturesque face any further. He forced himself to look professionally upon possible victims — small children, old ladies.

He shuddered at himself. His mind, which should be devoted to the humane practise of his profession, twisting itself into these devious and stupid byways of sin. He was glad when the night grew dark. Now he could get it over with.

He turned the car onto an ill-lit side road. "The first person I see," he muttered, "after I count a hundred. *One — two — three —*" He narrowed his eyes so that they saw only the road ahead. "*Fifty-five — fifty-six —*" Nothing to it. Simply a snatch. And then? "*Ninety-nine — one hundred.*" He widened his eyes and fixed them on the first person along the all but deserted street.

It was a policeman.

"May I be —" Iles began, but stopped. Once was enough; he had sworn off that oath ever since the night in the bar. But a cop was too much. Not even practical. Make it two hundred. "*One oh one — one oh two —*" His eyes narrowed again. What do you do with a once-abducted victim? Where on earth do you — "*One ninety-nine — two hundred.*"

This time it was an old woman in a shabby gray coat, carrying a string bag that clinked. Gilbert Iles set his teeth and pulled the car up to the curb. He flung the door open and tried to remember every gangster picture he had ever seen.

"Get in the car!" he snarled.

The old lady got in. "That's awfully nice of you," she said. "Of course I'm only going to my daughter's, the one that's married to the fireman, and it's just a ways up the hill here but I'm not so young as I used to be and these hills hit me in the back sometimes. It's awfully nice of you to give me a lift. You know, young man, you look like the picture Cousin Nell sent us of that boy her second girl married. You haven't got any folks in Cedar Rapids, have you?"

Gilbert Iles gave up. Just a way up the hill he stopped the car in front of the indicated house, opened his own door, got out, and helped his passenger to alight. She had not stopped talking once. "—and I do thank you, young man, and I wonder" — she reached into the clinking string bag — "if you'd like a glass of this jelly I was bringing my daughter? It's Satsuma

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plum and her Frank, he certainly does love it, but I guess he won't mind missing one glass. Here. You wouldn't like to come in and see that grandson I was telling you about? Of course he'd be asleep by now, but —"

"No, thanks," said Iles politely. "But give him my love. And thanks for the jelly."

As he drove off he muttered a full stream of what the demon had assured him could not be blasphemy, but which felt quite as satisfactory. Then back to the beginning. "*One — two — three —*" What would he run into this time? A detachment of marines? "*Ninety-nine — one hundred.*"

It was a man, alone. Iles pulled the car up just ahead of him, slipped out, and stood beside the walk waiting for him, his hand sinisterly thrust into his topcoat pocket.

"Get in the car!" he snarled.

The man looked at him, then burst out guffawing. "Iles, you old son of a gun! What a card! Wait'll I tell the boys down at City Hall! What are you doing wandering around here? Who waded into your face like that? Where's Linda? What a card! How's about a drink? There's a good joint near here. 'Get in the car!' What a card!"

"Ha ha," said Gilbert Iles.

What was all this? Were there really guardian angels, as well as wimps and demons, and was his deliberately frustrating his every effort at a serious sin? Well, there were still three hours to go. If he pretended to drop his abductive intention — Or can you fool a guardian angel? He didn't know.

He didn't care much either, after the third or fourth round. The politician was right; this was a good joint. The liquor was fair and the entertainers lousy; but there was a magnificent Negro who played such boogie-woogie as Iles had never heard before. Even curses and sins did not matter particularly when that boy really took it and lifted it out of this world.

In one ecstatic moment, Gilbert Iles's eye happened to light on the clock, and ecstasy vanished. It was almost 12:30.

"Sorry," he said hastily. "Got a date at one."

The politician leered. "And I thought you were a good boy. How about Linda?"

"Oh, that's all right. Linda told me to. Good-by." And he disappeared almost as rapidly as his friend the demon was wont to.

He turned up the first side street that presented itself. He didn't bother with the counting game this time. The minutes were short. His neck already twitched in anticipation of that garroting tail. Surely a trained lawyer's mind could find some way of breaking that curse. Surely — For one hesitant instant he wavered on the verge of discovery. His alcohol-sharpened intellect seemed, for one sharp moment, to see the solution of the whole problem.

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Then his eyes caught sight of a figure on the sidewalk, and the solution went *pop!*

The routine was becoming automatic. You pull up to the curb, you fake the presence of a gun, and you snarl, "Get in the car!"

The girl drew herself up haughtily. "What do you mean, get in the car?"

"I mean get in the car. And quick!"

"Oho you do, do you? And why should I get in the car?"

"Because I said so." His arm snaked out — he could not help comparing it to a silver-scaled tail — seized her wrist, and dragged her in. He slammed the door and without another word drove off.

He could not see the girl at all well, but she used the scent which Miss Krumpig had recently discarded.

"Where are you taking me? What are you going to do with me?"

"I'm going to abduct you."

"I . . . I'll scream. I warn you. I'll scream. I'll —" Abruptly she lowered her voice and slid over in the seat until she was touching him. "You wouldn't hurt me, would you?"

He did not care for the scent, but he was forced to admit that it had a certain effectiveness. "Who said anything about hurting you?" he said gruffly. "All I'm doing is abducting you."

On the other side of town from the beach, Gilbert Iles finally parked the car in a quiet street. The girl turned to him expectantly. The faint light of the dashboard cast heavy shadows around her face, giving it a half-seen allure that was almost beauty.

"Get out," he said firmly.

She gasped. "Get out — Oh, I get it. This is where you live." She got out and left the door open for him. He reached over and shut it.

"Consider yourself," he said, "abducted."

It was five after 1 as he drove away. The outraged yelp of the abandoned girl followed him. It was five after 1, and his neck was still whole. But he did not look forward to a lifetime career of abduction.

"Is your cold better?" Tom Andrews started to ask as his partner came into the office, but broke off and gaped at the colorful ruin of his face. "What in the name of seven devils have you been up to?"

"Just a spot of sin," said Gilbert Iles. "And it was only one devil."

"It'll wear off," said Andrews easily. "You take it easy today. I'll handle the appearance on the Irving appeal. You can't go into court . . . er . . . looking like that. A spot of sin, huh? You'll have to give me the address of that spot — for when I'm on vacation," he added pointedly.

Miss Krumpig gaped, too, when she brought in the morning mail. But

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she politely covered her amazement with small talk. "Isn't it hot today, Mr. Iles? My! I wish I were at the north pole!"

Iles jumped. "Don't *do* that!"

"Don't do what, Mr. Iles?"

"Don't make foolish wishes. You never know what they'll lead to. Don't ever let me hear you do such a thing again!"

He spent a busy day working on papers and seeing no one; a nice, dull, drab day. He got home in good time, wondering what Linda would have for dinner and what sin he could manage to force himself to commit that night. Not abduction again; definitely not abduction. Barratry seemed promising; now just how could he go about —

Linda wore a warning frown as she greeted him. "People," she said. "Strange people. I don't think they're possible clients but they insist on seeing you. They've been here for hours and now there isn't any more beer left and —"

Iles felt a trembling premonition. "Stick with me," he said.

The premonition was justified. He couldn't have sworn to the face of the abducted girl, but that was certainly her scent. How could she — Then it clicked. Simple for her to have read his name and address on the steering rod. And beside her, surrounded by a barricade of empty beer bottles, sat the biggest man that Gilbert Iles had ever seen. He looked like a truck driver; but the truck, to be worthy of him, would have to be huger than anything now on the roads.

"There he is!" the girl shrilled.

The giant looked up, and with no wordy prolog drained the bottle in his hand and hurled it at Iles's head. It missed by millimeters and shattered on the wall. It was followed by the giant's fist, which did not miss.

Gilbert Iles found himself sitting on the table in the next room. His ears were ringing with more than Linda's scream.

"Attaboy, Maurice!" the abductee chortled.

Maurice grinned and visibly swelled. "That, was just a starter."

Linda stepped firmly in front of him. "This is a fine way to act! You come into my house and drink up all my beer and then you sock my husband! Why, a demon's a gentleman alongside of you. Take that!" And she slapped his vast round face. She had to stand on tiptoe to do it.

"Look, lady," Maurice mumbled almost apologetically. "Thanks for the beer, sure. And that may be your husband, but he insulted my sister. Now let me at him."

Gilbert Iles tried to get off the table, but his head swam and his knees wonkled. He folded his legs under him and sat like Sriberdegibit, feeling as though he were changing size quite as persistently.

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"Any jerk what insults my sister," Maurice announced, "gets what's coming to him. And that's me."

Linda half turned to her husband. "Did you, Gil? Oh — But you said you wouldn't. You promised you wouldn't."

"Did I what?" Iles held on to the table with both hands; it showed signs of turning into the fringe-beard's magic carpet.

"Did you in . . . insult her? And after yesterday afternoon —"

"I did not," Iles snapped. "I utterly deny it. I did not insult her."

"Oh, no?" The abductee advanced on him. "I've never been so thoroughly insulted in all my life."

"Oh, Gil —"

"Look, lady," Maurice protested, "I got a job to do. You go run along and get dinner or something. You won't like to watch this."

"But I did not! I swear it! I simply abducted her."

The girl's fingernails flashed at him. "Oh, yeah? That's what you said. You tell a girl you're going to abduct her and you carry her off way to hell and gone and leave her stranded and never do a thing to her and if that isn't an insult I'd like to know what is."

"And I ain't standing for it, see," Maurice added.

Linda sighed happily. "Oh, Gil darling! I knew you didn't."

Maurice picked her up with one enormous paw and set her aside, not ungently. "Stick around if you want to, lady. But that ain't gonna stop me. And thanks for the beer."

Gilbert Iles's intention was to slip off the other side of the table. But his wonkling knees betrayed him, and he slipped forward, straight into a left that came from Maurice's shoelaces.

The magic carpet rose, drifting high over the Arabian sands. All the perfumes of Arabia were wafted sweetly about it. The carpet had another passenger, a houri whose face was veiled but who was undisputably Miss Krumpig. Though markedly affectionate, she kept calling him Maurice and telling him to go to it. Then out of a sandstorm emerged a jinni driving a truck. The truck drove straight at him and connected. The magic carpet turned into a handkerchief in the center of which there was a lake. Upon investigation he saw that this lake was blood and all from his own nose. He was an old man, an old man with a fringe beard, and who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him? The jinni appeared again bearing an enormous mammoth tusk which twanged. The jinni raised the tusk and brought it down on his head. A woman's voice kept calling, "Darjeeling," or was it, "darling"?

There was a moment's pause, and Gilbert Iles heard the cry clearly. It was, "Darling, say it. Say it!"

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He managed to ask, "Say what?" after spitting out a tooth or two.

"Say it! I can't, because it wouldn't work for me and I don't know what might happen but you say it and they'll go away because I've broken three vases on him and he just doesn't notice. So, oh, darling, *say it!*"

He was back on the carpet and so was the jinni. This time the jinni was wearing the tusk in his jaw and he looked amazingly like —

"Sriberdegibit!" Gilbert Iles groaned.

Then the jinni and the magic carpet and everything faded away to peaceful black.

Gilbert Iles opened his eyes in a darkened bedroom. There was an ice bag on his head and a smell of iodine and liniment clinging about him. He tried to move and decided it might be better to wait a day or so. He opened his mouth and heard something that sounded like a Voder in need of repair.

Through the hall door came in light and Linda. He managed to turn his head — and saw squatting on the bedside table the form of Sriberdegibit.

"Are you all right, dear?" Linda asked.

He said, "What do you think?" or a noise that meant as much, and then stared a silent question at the demon.

"I know," said Linda. "He won't go away unless you dismiss him. But it did work. When you said his name, there he was, and my! you should have seen Maurice and that woman clear out of there!"

"Sissies," said Sriberdegibit.

Undulant demons are more than a sick head can stand. "Begone!" said Gilbert Iles.

The demon shook his head. "Uh-uh. What's the use? I'd have to be back to strangle you in five minutes anyway."

Iles jumped, and every muscle ached with the motion. He managed to look at the bedside electric clock. It was 12:55.

"I didn't want to wake you," said Linda. "I never thought of that — You . . . you've been good today?"

He looked the question at the demon, who nodded dourly. "Like one of those cocky angels," he asserted.

"Then, you, What's-your-name, you're going to have to . . . to do things to him at 1 o'clock?"

"On the dot."

"But, Gil darling, can't you quick — I mean isn't there something you can do? I know you practically can't stir from where you are, but isn't there some way you can sin just in your mind? I'm sure there is. Work out a plan for barratry; doesn't planning a sin count? Can't you — Oh, Gil, you can't let yourself get garroted with a snake tail!"

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Enforced physical inaction had stimulated Iles's mind. While Linda pleaded, he was performing intricate calculations worthy of a specialist in canon law. Now he summoned up every whit of his power of trained articulation to make his words clear. They sounded inhuman, but intelligible.

"Sriberdegibit, is suicide a sin?"

"Oh, Gil dear, you wouldn't — Where would be the advantage —"

"Hush, Linda. Is it?"

"Yes. It's a sin against God or Man. It's a sin against the Giver of Life and against Life itself. It's what you'd call a real good solid sin."

"Very well. You may go, Srib."

"Huh? Like fun you say. It's 12:59 and a half, and here's where I come in." The tail twitched, then slowly began to reach out. Linda fought to repress a scream.

"Wait." Iles had never spoken so fast under such difficulty. "Suicide is a sin, right?"

"Right."

"If I refuse to commit a sin, I die, right?"

"Right."

"If I die through my own deliberate act, that's suicide, right?"

"Right."

"Then if I refuse to perform my daily sin, I am committing suicide, which is a sin. There, begone!"

The tail hesitated a fraction of an inch from Iles's throat. A very slow take spread over the demon's shifting face. He twanged his tusk twice. Then, "Why I . . . I'll be God *blessed!*" he said, and vanished.

"You know, darling," Linda said later, "it hasn't been so bad after all. You can take your vacation now and get all healed up again and then you'll never know you were ever cursed. In fact you'll be better than ever, because now you'll drive carefully and you won't spread scandal and you won't do anything shady in your profession and —" She paused and stared at him rapturously. "My! I have a brilliant husband!"

He nodded inarticulate thanks.

"That was the most beautiful thinking. Why now there won't be any stopping you. You'll go on and you'll be attorney general and governor and a justice of the supreme court and — No. No. I don't really want that. I wish —"

"Oh, oh!" Gilbert Iles groaned warningly.

"I wish," she continued unchecked, "that we could just go on living quietly, but very, very, *very* happily."

There was a wimp present.

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Here is the newest and one of the most vividly touching of Ray Bradbury's poetic legends of alien planets — and as a surprise, its setting is not Mars but Venus. Like Mr. Bradbury's Mars (and even, for that matter, his Terra), this Venus is not an astronomy-textbook planet mensurable by instruments and conforming to mechanistic laws, but a mirror (like that greatest Looking-Glass of them all) leading to a world of wonder . . . and reflecting more of ourselves than we can see unaided.

All Summer in a Day

by RAY BRADBURY

"Ready?"

"Ready."

"Now?"

"Soon."

"Do the scientists really know? Will it happen today, will it?"

"Look, look; see for yourself!"

The children pressed to each other like so many roses, so many weeds, intermixed, peering out for a look at the hidden sun.

It rained.

It had been raining for seven years; thousands upon thousands of days compounded and filled from one end to the other with rain, with the drum and gush of water, with the sweet crystal fall of showers and the concussion of storms so heavy they were tidal waves come over the islands. A thousand forests had been crushed under the rain and grown up a thousand times to be crushed again. And this was the way life was forever on the planet Venus, and this was the school room of the children of the rocket men and women who had come to a raining world to set up civilization and live out their lives.

"It's stopping, it's stopping!"

"Yes, yes!"

Margot stood apart from them, from these children who could never remember a time when there wasn't rain and rain and rain. They were all nine years old, and if there had been a day, seven years ago, when the sun came out for an hour and showed its face to the stunned world, they could

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not recall. Sometimes, at night, she heard them stir, in remembrance, and she knew they were dreaming and remembering gold or a yellow crayon or a coin large enough to buy the world with. She knew that they thought they remembered a warmness, like a blushing in the face, in the body, in the arms and legs and trembling hands. But then they always awoke to the tatting drum, the endless shaking down of clear bead necklaces upon the roof, the walk, the gardens, the forest, and their dreams were gone.

All day yesterday they had read in class, about the sun. About how like a lemon it was, and how hot. And they had written small stories or essays or poems about it:

"I think the sun is a flower,
That blooms for just one hour."

That was Margot's poem, read in a quiet voice in the still classroom while the rain was falling outside.

"Aw, you didn't write that!" protested one of the boys.

"I did," said Margot. "I *did*."

"William!" said the teacher.

But that was yesterday. Now, the rain was slackening, and the children were crushed to the great thick windows.

"Where's teacher?"

"She'll be back."

"She'd better hurry, we'll miss it!"

They turned on themselves, like a feverish wheel, all tumbling spokes.

Margot stood alone. She was a very frail girl who looked as if she had been lost in the rain for years and the rain had washed out the blue from her eyes and the red from her mouth and the yellow from her hair. She was an old photograph dusted from an album, whitened away, and if she spoke at all her voice would be a ghost. Now she stood, separate, staring at the rain and the loud wet world beyond the huge glass.

"What're *you* looking at?" said William.

Margot said nothing.

"Speak when you're spoken to." He gave her a shove. But she did not move; rather, she let herself be moved only by him and nothing else.

They edged away from her, they would not look at her. She felt them go away. And this was because she would play no games with them in the echoing tunnels of the underground city. If they tagged her and ran, she stood blinking after them and did not follow. When the class sang songs about happiness and life and games, her lips barely moved. Only when they sang about the sun and the summer did her lips move, as she watched the drenched windows.

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And then, of course, the biggest crime of all was that she had come here only five years ago from Earth, and she remembered the sun and the way the sun was and the sky was, when she was four, in Ohio. And they, they had been on Venus all their lives, and they had been only two years old when last the sun came out, and had long since forgotten the color and heat of it and the way that it really was. But Margot remembered.

"It's like a penny," she said, once, eyes closed.

"No it's not!" the children cried.

"It's like a fire," she said, "in the stove."

"You're lying, you don't remember!" cried the children.

But she remembered and stood quietly apart from all of them, and watched the patterning windows. And once, a month ago, she had refused to shower in the school shower-rooms, had clutched her hands to her ears and over her head, screaming the water mustn't touch her head. So after that, dimly, dimly, she sensed it, she was different and they knew her difference and kept away.

There was talk that her father and mother were taking her back to Earth next year; it seemed vital to her that they do so, though it would mean the loss of thousands of dollars to her family. And so, the children hated her for all these reasons, of big and little consequence. They hated her pale snow face, her waiting silence, her thinness and her possible future.

"Get away!" The boy gave her another push. "What're you waiting for?"

Then, for the first time, she turned and looked at him. And what she was waiting for was in her eyes.

"Well, don't wait around here!" cried the boy, savagely. "You won't see nothing!"

Her lips moved.

"Nothing!" he cried. "It was all a joke, wasn't it?" He turned to the other children. "Nothing's happening today. *Is* it?"

They all blinked at him and then, understanding, laughed and shook their heads. "Nothing, nothing!"

"Oh, but," Margot whispered, her eyes helpless. "But, this is the day, the scientists predict, they say, they *know*, the sun . . ."

"All a joke!" said the boy, and seized her roughly. "Hey, everyone, let's put her in a closet before teacher comes!"

"No," said Margot, falling back.

They surged about her, caught her up and bore her, protesting, and then pleading, and then crying, back into a tunnel, a room, a closet, where they slammed and locked the door. They stood looking at the door and saw it tremble from her beating and throwing herself against it. They heard her

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muffled cries. Then, smiling, they turned and went out and back down the tunnel, just as the teacher arrived.

"Ready, children?" She glanced at her watch.

"Yes!" said everyone.

"Are we all here?"

"Yes!"

The rain slackened still more.

They crowded to the huge door.

The rain stopped.

It was as if, in the midst of a film concerning an avalanche, a tornado, a hurricane, a volcanic eruption, something had, first, gone wrong with the sound apparatus, thus muffling and finally cutting off all noise, all of the blasts and repercussions and thunders, and then, secondly, ripped the film from the projector and inserted in its place a peaceful tropical slide which did not move or tremor. The world ground to a standstill. The silence was so immense and unbelievable that you felt that your ears had been stuffed or you had lost your hearing altogether. The children put their hands to their ears. They stood apart. The door slid back and the smell of the silent, waiting world came in to them.

The sun came out.

It was the color of flaming bronze and it was very large. And the sky around it was a blazing blue tile color. And the jungle burned with sunlight as the children, released from their spell, rushed out, yelling, into the summer-time.

"Now, don't go too far," called the teacher after them. "You've only one hour, you know. You wouldn't want to get caught out!"

But they were running and turning their faces up to the sky and feeling the sun on their cheeks like a warm iron; they were taking off their jackets and letting the sun burn their arms.

"Oh, it's better than the sun-lamps, isn't it?"

"Much, much better!"

They stopped running and stood in the great jungle that covered Venus, that grew and never stopped growing, tumultuously, even as you watched it. It was a nest of octopuses, clustering up great arms of flesh-like weed, wavering, flowering in this brief spring. It was the color of rubber and ash, this jungle, from the many years without sun. It was the color of stones and white cheeses and ink.

The children lay out, laughing, on the jungle mattress, and heard it sigh and squeak under them, resilient and alive. They ran among the trees, they slipped and fell, they pushed each other, they played hide-and-seek and tag, but most of all they squinted at the sun until tears ran down their

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faces, they put their hands up at that yellowness and that amazing blueness and they breathed of the fresh fresh air and listened and listened to the silence which suspended them in a blessed sea of no sound and no motion. They looked at everything and savored everything. Then, wildly, like animals escaped from their caves, they ran and ran in shouting circles. They ran for an hour and did not stop running.

And then —

In the midst of their running, one of the girls wailed.

Everyone stopped.

The girl, standing in the open, held out her hand.

"Oh, look, look," she said, trembling.

They came slowly to look at her opened palm.

In the center of it, cupped and huge, was a single raindrop.

She began to cry, looking at it.

They glanced quickly at the sky.

"Oh. Oh."

A few cold drops fell on their noses and their cheeks and their mouths. The sun faded behind a stir of mist. A wind blew cool around them. They turned and started to walk back toward the underground house, their hands at their sides, their smiles vanishing away.

A boom of thunder startled them and like leaves before a new hurricane, they tumbled upon each other and ran. Lightning struck ten miles away, five miles away, a mile, a half-mile. The sky darkened into midnight in a flash.

They stood in the doorway of the underground for a moment until it was raining hard. Then they closed the door and heard the gigantic sound of the rain falling in tons and avalanches everywhere and forever.

"Will it be seven more years?"

"Yes. Seven."

Then one of them gave a little cry.

"Margot!"

"What?"

"She's still in the closet where we locked her."

"Margot."

They stood as if someone had driven them, like so many stakes, into the floor. They looked at each other and then looked away. They glanced out at the world that was raining now and raining and raining steadily. They could not meet each other's glances. Their faces were solemn and pale. They looked at their hands and feet, their faces down.

"Margot."

One of the girls said, "Well . . . ?"

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No one moved.

"Go on," whispered the girl.

They walked slowly down the hall in the sound of cold rain. They turned through the doorway to the room, in the sound of the storm and thunder, lightning on their faces, blue and terrible. They walked over to the closet door slowly and stood by it.

Behind the closet door was only silence.

They unlocked the door, even more slowly, and let Margot out.

Two More Outstanding Writers!

In our next issue (on the stands in early March), we're lucky to bring you two outstanding writers whom you haven't met in these pages before: one of the best-established professionals, with dozens of notches on his space-blaster, and an unusually promising newcomer.

The old pro is William Tenn, master of shrewdly funny science-fantasy, with a fine essay in logical absurdity, *The Tenants*, which we think you'll rank among his classics. The novice is Marion Zimmer Bradley, whose long novelet *Centaurus Changeling* is one of the solidest pieces of detailed true science fiction that we've seen in some time — a study in biological problems of the interstellar future which should establish Mrs. Bradley as a major new contender.

You'll also find in the April issue a number of distinguished stories by writers who have appeared here before: a notable novelet of alien symbiosis by William Morrison, another of Fritz Leiber's bitter and poignant stories of a too-probable future, and stories by C. M. Kornbluth, Mack Reynolds, Evelyn E. Smith, and others of your favorites.

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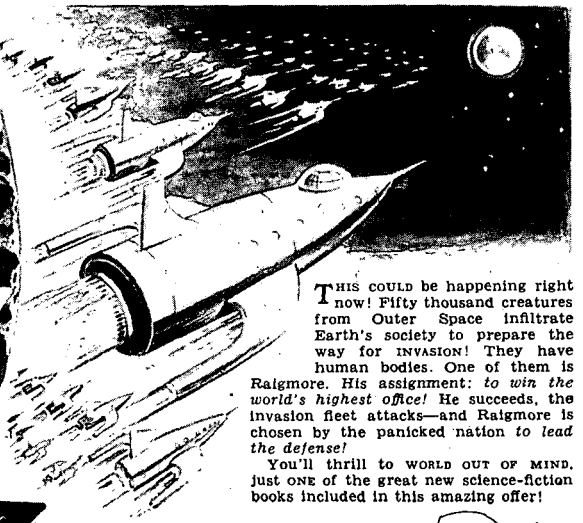

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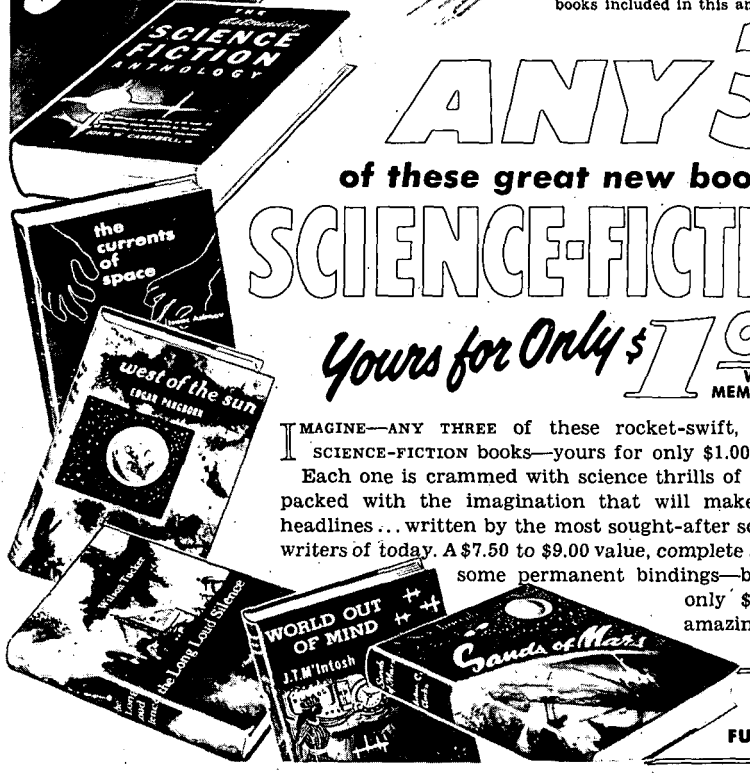

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